



# Sustainability Reporting Framing, Trust, and Stakeholders' Incompatibility Behavior on Legitimacy Perception

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**Abstract.** The current study looks at how message framing and intents that can be derived from various—positive vs. negative—framings, interact with the growth of trust. There is empirical support for the claim that various, logically similar frames are understood to imply various intentions. Next, the connection between trust and various frames (as well as the related intentions reflected from these frames) is investigated. The relationship between the assessment of trust derived from various frames and the related perceptions-behavior coming from these frames is next explored, and this is the most significant step. Think about two companies, A and B, who publish the same sustainability report, but each frames their report differently—one in a positive and the other in a negative frame.

The different frames may result in different assessments of the two companies' trustworthiness. According to conventional wisdom, if company A is more trusted than company B, one should prefer to give a better legitimacy perception to the former rather than the latter. Several experiment results contradict this hypothesis. For example, when given a choice between two companies who reported 20% of the liquid waste cannot be treated by the company's treatment facilities (negative frame) or process 80% of its liquid waste into clean water (positive frame), most people trust the former but they prefer to give their legitimacy to the latter. Trust-legitimacy perception incompatibility refers to the phenomenon in which negative framing weighs more in trust assessments and positive framing weighs more in legitimacy perception. The phenomenon's robustness is demonstrated further in several experiments, and possible explanations for its occurrence are discussed.

**Keywords:** framing, trust, legitimacy

## I. INTRODUCTION

Legitimacy is still not fully understood and is still confusing for scientists both theoretically and empirically. Legitimacy seen from

a research point of view is an object of analysis that is at the traditional level as a cross-level process of perception, conformity assessment, and conformity assessment and action in interactions between individuals [1]. Legitimacy itself is an important factor in business, it is a kind of "social license for operations" (SLO) especially when the company is experiencing times of crisis due to disapproval from the community which can harm the company [2].

The topic of trust is gaining popularity in organizational studies. "Scholars tend to mention [trust] in passing, to allude to it as a fundamental ingredient or lubricant, an unavoidable dimension of social interaction, only to move on to deal with less intractable matters,"[3]. Communication [4], information literacy [5], leadership [6][7], performance appraisal [8], workgroup performance [9], determinants in an institution [10], and pandemic crisis [11].

For several reasons, the public's trust orientation toward an organization is important. First, organizations are notoriously bad at repairing trust. As a result, understanding how to repair trust is a critical resource that management can use to limit the damage caused by organizational failures. Failure to recognize and respond appropriately to trust violations will only harm the organization's reputation and legitimacy in the marketplace. Second, the public's lack of trust in an organization may harm its reputation or the estimation in which a specific company is held by various constituents. As an important characteristic of an organization, reputation provides legitimacy and can be used to gain a competitive advantage [12].

Legitimacy has been studied in various contexts to find out its importance to organizations. However, it is still not possible to obtain a sufficient understanding of the relative factors that contribute to legitimacy, especially in large and complex communication systems as well as in the formation of legitimacy. Legitimacy has the potential to play an important role in eliciting voluntary factors in organizational behavior, therefore a better understanding of the factors of trust and fairness is essential for a deeper understanding of legitimacy. Furthermore, the perception of legitimacy is closely related to the image of information framing, so the perception of management actions and the quality of governance will be different in each demographic characteristic and context [13] [14]. This is an important study in complex socio-ecological systems with large resource user groups.

The ultimate hope of this study is to achieve more effective management of resources. Natural resource governance must be

done by fostering trust between stakeholders and managers. The findings of this study may demonstrate the importance of trust as a prerequisite for legitimacy in large and complex socio-ecological systems. A high level of trust in institutions is very important in determining the legitimacy of every management decision whose impact will be felt by stakeholders, this can reduce transactional costs as a result of increasing voluntary actions as a form of cooperation between various parties concerned [15]. It must be recognized that trust and legitimacy are created and manifested differently in different governance systems. In large socio-ecological systems conducive to resource users who have close contact or frequent interactions with regulators, it can be realized if trust between parties is continuously built.

Trust will be seen in intentions with implied and visible signs. Trust in support of the actions of all parties is a manifestation of trust. However, at a certain time when an explicit articulation of truth must be done, intentions cannot always be identified from signs so they must be uttered in language or from other things such as facial expressions [16]. Different formulations or framing of information in this context can lead to different perspectives of the recipients of information because framing can lead to different meanings of intrinsic intentions, and the impact on different levels of trust. How to deal with multiple intent variations to match intrinsic intent?

The purpose of this work is to determine the different effects of report framing on trustworthiness and choice of legitimacy. It begins by presenting empirical evidence that, although logically the information content is equivalent, different frames will exhibit different intentions. This paper also provides evidence of the relationship between various framings and trust. Finally, and most importantly, the relationship between trust judgments based on the framing of positive or negative information and the resulting legitimate choice behavior.

The incompatibility between the legitimacy choice and the trusted choice is thought to be caused by the fact that, the negative frame has a greater influence in the context of building trust, while the positive frame has a greater influence in the context of the legitimacy choice. In this study, this hypothesis was tested by four experiments that showed a discrepancy between trust-legitimacy choices.

## II. METHODOLOGY

### A. Experiment 1

Experiment 1 which was developed follows the model used by Levin with changes to the context of sustainability reporting, where companies report has processed 80% of its liquid waste into clean water, and 40% of the company's electricity needs are met using environmentally friendly solar power (positive framing), compared to the company reporting state that 20% of the liquid waste that been treated by the company's treatment facilities, and 60% of the company's electricity needs still come from coal-fired power plants (negative framing). Although the two terms are logically equivalent, describing the same type of company, they are not informationally equivalent, as McKenzie and Nelson (2003) define it. A company that publishes its sustainability in positive framing sends a slightly different message to its stakeholder and may be perceived to have different intentions than its counterpart who publish his sustainability report with negative framing. By stating the positive aspect, which the stakeholder presumably wants to maximize. The company is thus indicating that it is aware of the stakeholder's desire (i.e., a cleaner environment as possible) and is attempting to meet it. The other company, publishes its

sustainability reporting in a negative dimension, implying a disregard for the stakeholder's desires.

The preceding analysis yields a simple testable prediction. On the one hand, people are expected to prefer reporting that the state has positive framing over reporting that the state negative framing. This preference, on the other hand, should be eliminated when the qualifiers 'at least' and 'at most' are added. Experiment 1 was created to put this prediction to the test.

*Method.* Seventy-two students volunteered to participate in this experiment. Participants were given a scenario in which they were asked to choose which company is more legitimate. Half of the participants were told that their possible choice for two choices, on company that reportedly positive frame and a second one that was a company that reported a negative frame. The other half of the participants were told that one company in their sustainability reporting " reported has processed a minimum 80% of its liquid waste into clean water, and minimum 40% of the company's electricity needs are met using environmentally friendly solar power " (qualified positive frame) while the other's reported, " maximum 20% of the liquid waste has not been treated by the company's treatment facilities, and maximum 60% of the company's electricity needs still come from coal-fired power plants " (qualified negative frame). As a result, the two groups differed in terms of whether the relative amount of pollutants was expressed in a precise or qualified frame. All participants were asked to make a binary choice of which company is more legitimate, whether a company that uses positive framing or a company that uses negative framing in their reporting. The order in which the two options (Company using a positive or negative frame) from which participants had to choose was balanced.

The task of the participants is to mark from which two corporate they will give their legitimation. The order in which the two alternative responses (the company framing in their reporting) were presented was counterbalanced. The experiment, like all of the others described below, was carried out on a laptop as part of a series of decision-making studies, and each participant responded at his or her own pace.

*Discussion of the findings.* The results are shown in Table 1. Among the two ways of framing information, companies that present information in positive framing are chosen by the majority of subjects (67%). In accordance with our predictions, the interaction between the information frame and the proportion of participants choosing the clean or polluted formulation ( $p < 0.01$  using Fisher's exact test) revealed a clear preference of the subjects for the clean (positive) formulation under the right conditions but not under the qualifying conditions. This result is consistent with previous findings showing similar results where customers prefer companies that publish their reports in positive framing over negative framing [17]. This is also consistent with 'positive bias' research such as that conducted by [18], which shows people prefer to describe objects or situations in a positive rather than negative frame. Cognitively positive framing is easier to understand than negative framing, and descriptions in a positive way are more interesting than negative descriptions in explaining certain attributes [19] (in this study using a clean/polluted frame).

Positive framing is preferred by subjects who are faced with precise formulations because this form of the presentation shows that the company presents information that is more in line with what they fear or are worried about and signals that the company is 'trying' to satisfy their desires to the best of their ability. In contrast, a negative frame may be perceived as strange (why should a company state the negative attribute?) and may leave stakeholders perplexed. The 'clean water and environmentally

friendly solar power' framing sig the same positive intentions in the qualifying condition, which are amplified by the 'minimal' qualifier. However, if the information is intended to convey a negative aspect: by limiting the amount of effluent to no more than 20% and coal-fired power plants to no more than 60%, the company signals that it does not care about the wishes of the subject and expresses no explicit effort to minimize it. As a result, in qualifying conditions, both companies are considered equally concerned with stakeholder preferences.

TABLE 1. NUMBER PARTICIPANTS CHOICE

Frame	Precise		Min-Max		Total	
<b>Group A</b>						
Positive	28	78%	20	77%	48	67%
Negative	8	22%	16	62%	24	33%
<b>Group B</b>						
Positive	29	81%	22	85%	51	71%
Negative	7	19%	14	54%	21	29%

The concept of information leakage by McKenzie & Nelson (2003) can provide an alternative explanation that is in line. The positive frame indicates an implicitly different direction from the reference point, because the 80% clean water and 40% eco-solar reference point is positively formulated, this implies that the actual value is more likely to be higher than the implicit reference point. Conversely, a negative frame reference point, due to its negative nature, implies that the true value may be lower than the stated 20% effluent and 60% electricity from coal power. Adding a qualifier to the reference point ('at least' or 'at most') does not affect the respective framing reference point, but both conditions explicitly state that the true value, if any, will be preferred by the subject. In other words, both companies now assert that the true value can be placed on the positive side of the frame of reference (more than 80% clean water or less than 20% liquid waste and more than 40% environmentally friendly solar power or less than 60% coal-fired power), creating both frames equally appealing.

The test results on qualifying framing are consistent with studies reported by Sanford, Fay, Stewart, & Moxey, (2002). Small variations in the quantity of information lead to different perspectives, which affect subsequent processing [12]. For example, in different contexts, empirical results show that the terms "a little", and "not much", which seem to define the same proportions, have different perspectives and "feel" in disclosure so they are not always seen as having the same weight.

The results in experiment 1 with the currently used information framing, the framing effect shown can be explained through understanding the signal given by the sender (company) to the receiver (stakeholder). Subjects in the experiment play the role of recipients, and they must choose which company is more legitimate based on the type of message (frame) they receive. Assume that the receiver and the speaker share the same signal code in the current state. The expected effect of the subject placed in the speaker role will have the same expression and choice as the participant would use if he or she were in the receiver role.

## B. Experiment 2

Using the assumption of the cooperative principle, that the speaker and listener share some implicit assumptions [20] analysis and interpretation of the experimental results 1. The principle is based on mutual trust and a suitable understanding that the speaker tries to choose the frame that has the clearest and most accurate interpretation. This means that words and speech can accurately explain the thoughts and intentions of the speaker. What happens if this assumption is not met? It is to answer this question that this experiment was conducted, with an emphasis on knowing the

consistency of the choice of subjects even though they had good reasons to doubt the principle of cooperation.

*Method.* The experimental subject involved forty-six students from STIE YKPN Yogyakarta who volunteered. Participants were divided into three groups and presented with a cover story similar to that used in Experiment 1 (only the 'right' condition was used). Group 1 subjects were told that both companies are companies that have a trustworthy reputation in the industry. Subject group 2 was informed that the two companies had a reputation for being untrustworthy in the industry, and in group 3 one of the two companies had a reputation for not always being trustworthy in the industry, even though the identity of the company was unknown. Subjects were asked to prefer one of the two companies that were considered more legitimate as in Experiment 1. The order of presentation of the two choices was balanced, as in the previous experiment.

*Discussion of the finding.* Table 2 summarizes the findings of Experiment 2. From this table, it can be seen that the three conditions given to the subject group revealed a strong preference for companies that use positive framing (about 68% of the participants). Under conditions of ceteris paribus, this positive bias is common in many decision-making situations, as evidenced by experiments later in this article. In the condition that both companies are said to be trustworthy, the results are in line with the results in Experiment 1, i.e. most of the subjects (87%) prefer to choose companies that publish environmental reports with positive framing, where subjects are suspected to assume that both companies are trustworthy and thus they adhere to the principle of cooperation. Subjects' responses changed when unreliable assumptions were put forward, as in the remaining two conditions. When both companies are said to be untrustworthy, the proportion of people who prefer companies that use positive framing decreases (70%), this result is significantly lower than in the first condition (p0.001 result of Fisher's exact test). On the condition that only one company can be trusted, the choice in positive framing drops even further (to 48%). This latter result is consistent with the normative conjecture: because Subjects were not told which company could not be trusted, they were unable to articulate the hidden signal of the conditions the two choices described, and thus the subjects responded randomly.

TABLE 2. NUMBER OF PARTICIPANT'S CHOICES WHICH COMPANY IS MORE TRUSTWORTHY BASED ON THEIR REPORT

Preference	Both Trustworthy		Both Untrustworthy		One Trustworthy	
	Positive	40	87%	32	70%	22
Negative	16	13%	14	30%	24	52%

Experiment 2 was used to determine the interaction between trust (as manipulated in the current experiment) and information framing. Two main conclusions can be drawn from this experiment. First, there is trust between the speaker and the listener so they can communicate cooperatively. This hypothesis is supported by the similarity in the pattern of responses between Experiment 2 (where the subject was explicitly told that both companies can be trusted) and Experiment 1 (where no information about the level of trustworthiness of the two companies was explicitly given to the subject). Second, when there is reason to doubt the trust of others, then there will be doubts to defend the statement, then the response of the subject's choice of legitimacy changes accordingly. It can be seen that the responses of the subjects in the two conditions where trust cannot be determined and the conditions where there is high mutual trust are different.

Second, in the condition that there is doubt about the trustworthiness of the chosen company, the subject will find it difficult to maintain his choice so the subject's response will change in line with this. The similarity of the response pattern is in line with the results in Experiment 1 which did not explicitly mention the level of trustworthiness of the company's choice with Experiment 3 which stated the level of trustworthiness of the company's choice to support the hypothesis.

**C. Experiment 3**

*Method.* Eighty-one STIE YKPN students volunteered to participate in this experiment. The same scenario used in Experiment 1 was presented to all subjects. As in the previous experiment, half of the subjects were given the precise formulation (, where the companies report has processed 80% of its liquid waste into clean water, and 40% of the company's electricity needs are met using environmentally friendly solar power, compared to the company reporting state that 20% of the liquid waste has not been treated by the company's treatment facilities, and 60% of the company's electricity needs still come from coal-fired power plants.), while the other half were given the qualified formulation (80% clean water - 40% environmentally friendly solar power s 20% liquid waste-60% coal-fired power plants). The only difference between this experiment and experiment 1 was that subjects in this experiment were asked to rate the trustworthiness of the two companies. Half were asked whom they would trust more of the two companies, while the other half were asked whom they would distrust more. In all circumstances, the second order of response choices from the subjects was presented equally.

*Discussion of the finding.* Table 3 displays the outcomes. There was no difference in the pattern of results between assessing trust or distrust for both the precise and qualified formulation conditions. As a result, these findings were combined by converting the number of Subjects who distrust the "polluted" company to the number of Subjects who trust the "green" company and vice versa. In the specific condition, the majority of subjects (30 or 73,1%) trusted the company that used the negative frame, publish their report as 20% of the liquid waste has not been treated by the company's treatment facilities, and 60% of the company's electricity needs still come from coal-fired power plants. The number of subjects who trusted this company was significantly higher than those who trusted the positive frame company. In the qualifying condition, more participants (22 or 55%) trusted the "polluted" company than the "clean" company, but this difference was not statistically significant. The precise condition had significantly more subjects who trusted the company that used the negative frame than the qualifying condition.

TABLE 3. NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS TRUST AND DISTRUST IN EXPERIMENT3

Frame	Trust		Distrust	
	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage
<b>Exact Proportion</b>				
Positive	6	28.5%	15	75%
Negative	15	71.5%	5	25%
<b>Qualified Proportion</b>				
Positive	9	45%	11	55%
Negative	11	55%	9	45%

Experiment 3 results are in some ways contradictory to those obtained in Experiment 1. Taken together, the two experiments indicate that most people trust the company who declares its unprocessed liquid waste to be 20% and 60% coal-fired power plants (negative frame), but the majority chose to trust the company that reported as 80% clean water and 40% environmentally friendly solar power (positive frame). In traditional knowledge, if there are two choices where agent X is

more trustworthy than agent Y, then, in general people prefer to make a transaction or make a choice on X rather than Y. The pattern of results from Experiments 1 and 3 turns out to be contrary to this traditional knowledge and can be referred to as a trust-choice mismatch [12].

However, regarding the differences in the use of subjects in Experiments 1 and 3 researchers suspect that there is a discrepancy due to comparisons between subjects. Therefore, to determine the consistency and robustness of the results of the previous experiment, Experiment 4 was carried out using an in-subject design, where each participant equally assessed which two company choices were more trustworthy and which were not.

**D. Experiment 4**

*Method.* Experiment 4 involved eighty-seven students who voluntarily took part in this experiment. All subjects were given treatment with the same scenario in Experiments 1 and 3. Subjects were asked to choose which company they would give legitimacy to and which company they would trust. The subject choice was taken based on company information that framed sustainability reports as 20% liquid waste-60% coal-fired power plants or who framed it as 80% clean water - 40% environmentally friendly solar power The order of questions was trust first vs legitimacy first and two company options A or B is served equally.

*Discussion of the findings.* The results of experiment 4 are presented in Table 4, which can be viewed in a Table 2 x 2 format with the columns representing the trust decisions, and the rows representing the legitimacy decisions. The results show the pattern of responses shown by the majority of subjects choosing to make a legitimacy decision first, after which the new subject assesses their trust. For example, in the table on the left where the subject chooses legitimacy first, 12 participants trust a "clean" company more and say they will give them legitimacy (top left cell); 18 participants trusted "polluting" companies more but said they would give legitimacy to "clean" companies (top right cell)]. Similarly, the middle 2x2 table illustrates the response pattern of the subject who prioritizes making a trust assessment before making a legitimacy decision. As many as 30 subjects trust the company "polluters" but only 15 subjects will give legitimacy to "polluters". The homogeneity test of the Breslow-Day odds ratio showed no statistically significant difference in the outcome pattern. The homogeneity test of the Breslow-Day odds ratio revealed that there was no significant difference between the patterns of the results of the two tables. Because there is no difference in the order of the questions, the data can be summarized in the rightmost 2x2 table.

TABLE 3. NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS' CHOICE IN EXPERIMENT5

	Choice	Trust					
		Legitimacy First		Trust First		Combined	
		Clean	Pollute	Clean	Pollute	Clean	Pollute
<b>Legitimacy</b>	<b>Clean</b>	12	18	13	15	25	33
	<b>Pollute</b>	2	11	1	15	3	26
						28	59

From Table 4, we can see that there were 36 subjects (41.3%) who did the incompatibility of the legitimacy choice - trust, and 51 (58.7%) subjects were consistent between the trust assessment and the legitimacy choice. 36 subjects indicated that their legitimacy choice behavior did not match their trust assessment. In this incompatibility subject they prefer to give legitimacy to "clean" companies (positive frame) but trust "polluting" companies (negative frame). This means that the subject prefers to choose a

positive frame in their legitimacy decisions, but negative framing has more of an impact on trust in the subject. Only a small number of participants (3) showed a mismatch in the opposite direction. Therefore, the discussion can be focused on the issue of trust-legitimacy choice incompatibility.

The results from Experiment 4 are consistent with the findings of Experiments 1 and 3, suggesting that trust-legitimacy incompatibility is a valid finding in both between-subject and in-subject designs. The consistency of the results persists even if the order of the statements is changed (legitimacy decisions first, or belief judgments first). The fact that trust-legitimacy incompatibility is observed regardless of the order in which trust and legitimacy questions are presented adds to the robustness of the phenomenon. The experiment was carried out with the traditional logic that by evaluating the trust first, the subject would follow the initial assessment to choose to give legitimacy to the company they trust. On common ground logic, if a person trusts A more than B for whatever reason, he has a better reason to give legitimacy to A than B, other things being equal. The reverse logic that one gives legitimacy to A and thus has more reason to believe in A is certainly odd, but was discovered in this experiment.

### III. CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to investigate the impact of using positive and negative framing on the legitimacy of choice decisions and the formation of trust. There are three conclusions based on the empirical evidence found in this study. First, under equal conditions, voters prefer to make positive framing in assembling legitimate choices. The effect of reinforcing choices on positive frames can be strengthened by making small additions to detailed information using qualifiers such as "at least" and "at most". The use of these qualifications makes the assessment reference point of the rewarded subject, and options are evaluated relative to the reference point, thereby influencing the subject's decision. Second, although positive frames are the default in making choices when framing is used to build trust, it seems that the subject prefers negative frames. This makes the phenomenon in the third conclusion, the difference in the effect of framing on election behavior and trust causes the emergence of trust-legitimacy choice incompatibility dilemma.

Trust-legitimacy choice incompatibility describes the strength of the framing effect on preferences and is not a logical contradiction in trust assessment and legitimacy choice decisions because the weight of the information contained is the same. In this study, trust-legitimacy choice incompatibility could be interpreted as a lack of compatibility rather than a logical inconsistency, as mentioned earlier. However, there is some trade off limitations in this study. First, a trade off-view assumes that trust and legitimacy choice considerations occur simultaneously, whereas a trust assessment is frequently assumed to occur prior to the legitimacy choice decision. Second, noncomparable (difficult to align) attributes include trust and sustainability considerations when making a legitimacy choice (relevant with trust and choice attributes as found by Johnson, 1984, Keren, 2007). Most importantly, this article provides unambiguous empirical results of an order effect in which trust-legitimacy choice incompatibility, or the mismatch between trust and legitimacy choice, is significantly stronger when trust is preceded by legitimacy choice (in contrast to the conventional wisdom trust) than when trust follows legitimacy choice. From a straightforward trade-off perspective, it is challenging to explain this finding. According to my interpretation, which is consistent with the empirical evidence found in this research, there are few, if any, trade-off considerations when trust precedes legitimacy choice.

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