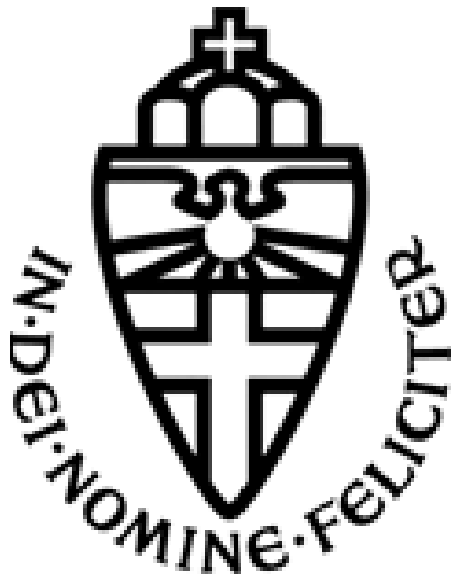


# Master thesis



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Legitimacy for firms' sustainable practices on plastic: The legitimacy of a firm's sustainability agenda through CSR and discourse.

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## Abstract

During the last years, the crisis of plastic waste has been increasing in saliency, and the awareness on its environmental consequences is demanding companies to react. This creates a challenge for companies to maintain their legitimacy when addressing sustainability. This study is an attempt to reveal what discursive and textual contents companies use to support their sustainability agenda on countering plastic waste related problems. To achieve this, I reviewed literature on CSR and CSR communication strategies, legitimacy and discursive legitimacy, as well as sustainability. All of which are relevant in the context of the thesis. Furthermore, I use the companies' publication contents in the form of press releases, tweets and sustainability reports to identify the companies' direction in sustainability and their stance on plastic waste. On the other hand, to identify public perception over the companies' sustainable agenda, I used the press and environmental activism as a parameter to determine the public's perception of the companies' legitimacy on sustainability in plastic waste. The thesis shows the impact of a company's discursive legitimization strategies, aligned with its CSR strategies, over its sustainability legitimacy on plastic waste overtime. This supports companies in formulating strategies that secure its legitimacy in sustainability for the long term. In conclusion, this thesis participates in further reinforces existing theories on legitimacy in the context of sustainability, and analyzes legitimacy through CSR, discursive legitimacy and sustainability.

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## 1.0 Introduction

Buyers want to feel good about their purchase choices. They like to know that they had made the right decisions in purchasing a product for its price, characteristics and utility, and they feel better when they know that they have purchased a product that does not harm the environment (Mc. Donald & Oates, 2006). While pressure for responsible environmental activity increases, companies are encouraged to engage in social initiatives to gain a competitive advantage, since the “institution of business exists only because it performs valuable services for society... if [a] business wishes to retain its present social role and social power, it must respond to society’s needs and give society what it wants” (Davis, 1973, p. 314). Unfortunately, the efforts made by companies are often perceived as insufficient, the negative environmental impact of companies on society is far greater than corporate action that meets it, and companies should not just be making a contribution, but taking a lead. (Brindle, 2014). This idea revolves around the term “legitimacy”, which is the indicator of social reputation and perception on company behaviours. One way of observing legitimacy is through organisational discourse through social media, and in this study, it will be in context of the increasingly trending issue of plastic pollution.

Legitimacy is an age-old issue, the origins of which can be traced all the way to Machiavelli and the ancient Greek philosophers (Zelditch and Walker 2003; Erkama & Vaara, 2010), expecting leaders to conform to laws or validate their actions with arguments to the public. Today, legitimacy is defined as 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” (Suchman, 1995a, p.4). Society rewards those who are aligned the most with its norms and values, and this motivates companies to become legitimate. Legitimacy is also defined as the social acceptance resulting from adherence to regulative, normative or cognitive norms and expectations of society (Deephouse & Carter, 2005). Furthermore, legitimacy is also viewed as a resource on which corporations are dependent for their survival (Dowling & Pfeffer, 1975); although legitimacy is an intangible resource, without it, a company’s actions can jeopardize its reputation, and at worst, alienate it from society.

Over the last twenty years, scientists have amassed much evidence of the extinction of species, soil depletion, deforestation, minerals depletion, carbon dioxide and CFC buildup, pollution and so on (Oriordan, 1993). People are becoming increasingly aware on the environmental damage caused by companies. Thanks to social media, the environmental consequences of company activities are

vulnerable to virality and criticism. This makes the company's misbehavior toward nature salient and forces it to respond to the public. Consequently, new ethical expectations have risen along with a set of contingent social responsibilities that corporations are now asked to fulfil by the various groups of stakeholders in society (Moreno and Capriotti, 2009; retrieved from Colleoni, 2013). People increasingly demand that the corporations justify and legitimize not only their economic actions, but also their social and environmental actions, and one way to attain this is through corporate social responsibility communication, since CSR is a way that companies contribute to the betterment of society (Colleoni, 2013). This represents a challenge for a company's public perception.

Scholars have defined various discursive legitimation strategies that improve company reputation in the context of sustainability (Poisson-de Haro & Bitektine, 2014; Baumgartner & Rauter, 2016). Other scholars have studied the impact of delegitimation, media, press releases and public discourse on organisation legitimacy (Palazzo & Vaccaro, 2015; Vaara et al., 2008). Furthermore, the roles of CSR strategies and legitimation strategies through social media have been well defined (Golob, 2013; Colleoni, 2013). The thesis approaches company legitimacy in sustainability through analyzing CSR communication, discursive legitimacy and sustainability from a qualitative angle, specifically through analyzing press releases, newspapers and social media. There is also a lack of knowledge on environmental-specific discursive legitimation concerning plastic waste. This study concentrates on analyzing discursive legitimation strategies used by companies and stakeholder perspectives on company agendas over plastic waste online. I developed a model that helps readers see how 3 different companies use discourse to legitimize their sustainable practices. The goal of this study is to find what CSR strategies and discursive legitimation strategies help increase a company's legitimacy in sustainability based on stakeholder perception (in the shape of newspapers and environmental organizations). Thus, my research question is as follows:

*What combination of CSR strategies and discursive legitimation strategies contribute to the legitimation of a company's sustainable agenda overtime?*

I selected 3 large MNEs, all with sustainable programs, and compared them to each other. The items of comparison are the CSR strategies that set the framework of how the companies execute their sustainable and environmental agendas on one hand, and on the other hand the content of the companies' twitter activity and press releases. This should help us determine how they influence stakeholder response and perception of the companies' sustainable stance, eventually, defining the firm's sustainability legitimacy. Despite their active role in environmental projects and sustainability initiatives, these companies are highly controversial as they are responsible of massive

environmental damage. The importance of sustainable legitimacy is due to the large size of these companies, that is why they have been receiving plenty of pressure from stakeholders as a call for action. The issue that I will be addressing in specific will be that of plastic waste in the industry of food processing and drinks. Because the focus on plastic pollution, this particular industry is relevant as a result of the mass production of plastic bottles that harm the environment. I will study the different discursive legitimation strategies that each company uses in this context, as well as the combination of CSR and discursive legitimation strategies which yield the most positive results for company legitimacy in sustainability.

In the next chapters, I shall attempt to answer my research question using the following structure. First, in the theory section, I will discuss the theory behind the concepts of legitimacy and discursive legitimation strategies, CSR and CSR communication strategies and how they link with sustainability and a stakeholder perception. Second, in the methodology section, I will explain the qualitative study and empirical setting by introducing the three chosen companies in the context of sustainability. I also explain the method of data collection and analysis, and the sources where we can observe firm's discursive legitimation strategies and CSR strategies that show stakeholder perception within a time-frame. Third, I will discuss the findings of the study and the relevance of the results. Finally, the thesis concludes with the analysis of study limitations and discussion.

## 2.0 Theory

To understand legitimacy and CSR in the context of sustainability, we need to have a deep understanding of legitimacy and how it has been reviewed in earlier studies. I shall go through the concepts of legitimacy, discursive legitimacy and CSR and CSR communication. Finally, I explain the connection between legitimacy and CSR, and how they put to context with sustainability.

### 2.1 Legitimacy

In this section, I will review the relevant key terms that make the foundation of the thesis. Starting by legitimacy, what has been studied and the importance of legitimacy using previous literature on the topic. Next I will define discursive legitimation and discursive legitimation strategies, with an overview on institutional studies. I then explain the role of CSR and reflect CSR communication strategies that contribute to the company's stance in society. Finally, I shall reveal the relationship

between discursive legitimation strategies and CSR communication strategies to identify the sustainability legitimacy of firms.

### 2.1.1 Definition

Organizations need to maintain their legitimacy (or generate it) through their activities by making them congruent with the values of the “superordinate” system in society (Dowling & Pfeffer, 1975). To make a firm legitimate in the eyes of the public, its practices have to be acceptable to the norms, values, behaviours, judgement, acceptance, and perception of society (Suchman, 1995; Bitektine, 2011). One definition for legitimacy is “the social acceptance resulting from adherence to regulative, normative or cognitive norms and expectations.” Deephouse and Carter (2005, p. 332). Firm actions have to be conducted in a legitimate manner to produce value for shareholders and keep positive public perception (Erkama & Vaara, 2010 from Budros 1997). Therefore, one can assume that a company’s legitimacy is an intangible asset that can be earned, lost or accumulated over time (Suddaby et al., 2017). As a result, the ownership of this asset can offer a competitive advantage to a company in its environment by being viewed as desirable. On the other hand, “the loss of legitimacy can have dramatic repercussions for resource availability, market presence and competitive stature.” (Donoher, 2017). As a result, negative implications on a company’s competitiveness and image, this can happen in the form of legal, economic or social sanctions (Dowling & Pfeffer, 1975).

During the last few decades, much knowledge has been accumulated on legitimacy. During the early stages, fundamentals on the dimensions of legitimacy have been laid out. We now know that legitimacy operates on three perceptive levels, *Pragmatic*, where the self-interested calculations of an organization's most immediate audiences are met; *Moral*, which is based on the judgments about whether the organization’s activity is "the right thing to do."; and finally *Cognitive*, which represents the comprehensibility and taken-for-grantedness of an organization’s actions. (Schuman, 1995; Vaara et al., 2006). The same basic dimensions of legitimacy are studied again from a rhetorical perspective in 2010. These dimensions are *Logos*, for rational and pragmatic legitimacy; *Pathos*, for emotional and moral legitimacy; and *Ethos* as authority based legitimacy (Erkama & Vaara, 2010). Understanding the foundations of this term will help us understand its derivations.

Later on, scholars continued to develop the term and studied practical applications for organizational strategies and institutional integration. To do so, one needs to define the participants in the process of

legitimation. We now know that the process of legitimation involves three different actors. First, the *object* of legitimation, this is the entity or organisation that seeks to build or establish its legitimacy, and is being evaluated by others. Second, a *change agent*, this is the entity(s) or institution(s) that seeks social change and redefines what is deemed legitimate in society. Finally, the *Evaluator*, This entity(s) judges the “*object*” and determines whether it is legitimate or not (Suddaby, 2017). We can apply this to the context of organizational legitimacy in its sustainable practices as follows; the “object” is the company or organization in question that wishes to remain legitimate to the public. The “change agent” can be an international, governmental or scientific institution that found the necessity to implement changes in organizational practices that could potentially harm the environment. The “evaluator” is the general public, including newspapers, people and activists that under the new information judge the companies “object” and define the real legitimacy of the company. From a company’s perspective, this judgment can be in the form of, social pressure, legal sanctions, and criticism (discursive delegitimation) from the media in an attempt to coerce the company to change and adopt sustainable practices.

There are three main traditions in how legitimacy has been studied. These are legitimacy as a process, a property and a perception (Suddaby, 2017). It is fundamental to see why these traditions differ. *Process* looks at legitimacy as a set of activities to consistently maintain through the interactions with stakeholders. *Property* looks at legitimacy as a quantifiable resource that can be earned and lost. *Perception* is the notion of appropriateness, judgement or taste (Suddaby, 2017). All these traditions are of course not independent from one another, they all are proportionate to one another; this means that these three study traditions serve as dimensions for legitimacy and not as independent aspects for the term. A company has to be aware its legitimacy as a process, property and perception.

Since legitimacy is dependent on the public perception for companies, institutional studies have participated in the efforts of understanding firm responses to non-market pressures (Voinea & Van Kranenburg, 2017). We know that because scholars have studied how the public forms judgements on a company’s legitimacy (Bitektine, 2011). Institutional studies can be linked to legitimation studies from the perspective of organizational response to stakeholder judgment; we know that companies can take various stances in response to social pressures. A company can acquiesce to change and react to social pressure, it can compromise with stakeholders, avoid confrontation and ignore social pressures, it can defy change and publicly resist change, or it can manipulate stakeholder opinion (Voinea & Van Kranenburg, 2017). However, literature on legitimation shows



that companies follow acquiescent and congruent strategies in response to stakeholder pressures in order to achieve organizational legitimacy (Dowling & Pfeffer, 1975; Schumann, Zimmerman & Zeitz, 2002; 1995; Suddaby et al., 2017). We can see as these organisational response strategies in Suddaby et al.'s (2017) study, and these strategies fit well in this thesis because they are specific to social pressure and to environmental issues. They finally conclude 3 response strategies. *Isomorphic adaptation*, this is when companies assimilate similar structures and processes facing change. *Decoupling*, this is the maintenance of legitimacy on a superficial level while keeping operations in status quo. Finally, *Performing*, here a firm takes the lead and demonstrates technical superiority (Suddaby, McDonald et al., 2006).

I have already discussed the importance of legitimacy to companies, also in the context of sustainability. Yet from a financial point of view, solid motivation to invest in structural and operational changes has to exist, and benevolence is not a sufficient answer for this behaviour. According to Davis (1973), companies are motivated to become legitimate for three reasons. First, long-run self-interest, where there is a predicted future profit if social needs are met. Second, public image, supporting social goals provides the company with a favorable image. Third, institutional viability, following social trends and needs is one way to perform valuable services to society. Some companies prefer to conform symbolically without extensive changes in operations as an attempt to preserve a sustainable image; others become inert in the face of change (King & Lenox, 2000; Poisson-de Haro & Bitektine, 2015). One may conclude that the benefits of adopting social trends benefits firms deeply and beyond the premise of philanthropy.

When a company behaves or performs activities that disagree with social norms, public values or views, it could be subject to delegitimation. Delegitimation means establishing a sense of negative, morally reprehensible or otherwise unacceptable action or overall state of affairs (Rojo & Van Dijk, 1997; Van Leeuwen & Wodak, 1999; Vaara, 2014). One of the most common forms of delegitimation (discursive delegitimation) is moralization (Vaara et al., 2006); this could be due to the ease of criticizing morally conflicting company statements and activities. As shown in earlier studies, in political and organizational discourse, using moralizations as a delegitimation strategy is relevant (Vaara, 2014). Since moral engagement (/disengagement) is critical in the legitimation process (Vaccaro & Palazzo, 2015).

Other studies on legitimation explore how legitimacy affects different industries and new industries (Dowling & Pfeffer, 1975; Aldrich & Fiol, 1995). Aldrich and Fiol (1995) studied how new ventures

establish legitimacy in a new environment, and that to do that they need Cognitive and Socio-political legitimacy. Dowling and Pfeffer (1975) found that legitimacy can affect different companies differently depending on their transparency and socio-political support. They also found that contribution to charity counts as a legitimating behaviour (Dowling & Pfeffer, 1975). Literature has also established the term discursive legitimacy, which is one of the two ways that firms are evaluated by the public; those are by discursive actions or non-discursive actions. Discursive legitimation is a method of legitimation that uses verbal communication to legitimize certain actions or practices, while non-discursive legitimation uses non-verbal activities to legitimize firm actions (Bitektine, 2011). The stakeholders can use both for discursive and non-discursive legitimation and delegitimation of firm behaviour as it is shown in Bitektine's "Ideal-Type Model of Social Judgment Formation" (Bitektine, 2011) (see Appendix). In the next section, I will discuss the latter form of legitimacy that which the shape of text and speech.

### 2.1.2 Discursive Legitimacy

Discursive legitimacy uses language in the analyses and production of a firm's textual and vocal content in its attempt to form its legitimacy through communication within its social context (Fairclough, 2003). Discursive legitimacy can come in the forms of promising reform, engaging in dialogue with the relevant audiences in order to convince them about the desirability or moral superiority of an alternative course of action (Oliver 1991; Suchman 1995; Deephouse and Suchman 2008; Seidl, Sanderson & Robert, 2012: p.5). Discursive legitimacy is one way that companies implement legitimation strategies. People do not use language just to make accurate representations of certain objects but, rather, to accomplish things" (Joutsenvirta & Vaara, 2009). Ultimately, discursive legitimation strategies are implemented when a company needs to protect or reinforce its legitimacy. To apply them, one must first understand how an issue arises in society, and at what point in time does it become delegitimizing for a company.

The reason why legitimacy becomes a topic of interest is because a social issue arises. Scholars have described the evolution of a social issue goes through 5 stages , the evolution of a topic from a neutral one as it escalates into a focal point of attention. This cycle by David Barons, as shown in figure (1), starts with the identification of an issue, to the formation of interest groups that promote the issue, aiming to activate legal attention, then regulations and plans are spawned as a response, and finally the issue cycle ends at the implementation of these plans and the enforcement of these

regulations (Vionera & Van Kranenburg, 2017; Barons, 1995). At this point, One can call the process of putting pressure on a company processes or its activities as “delegitimation” from stakeholders. Delegitimation is the “building-up of unfavorable evaluations of the legitimacy-claiming entity by its stakeholders and as such it represents a collective undermining of what was previously-supported” (Berger et al., 1998; Shrivastava & Ivanova, 2015: p.4). It only makes sense to engage in discursive legitimation when there is a rising social issue that requires from companies to react. This institutional study helps understand the discursive legitimation, and introduces us to the application of discursive legitimation strategies.

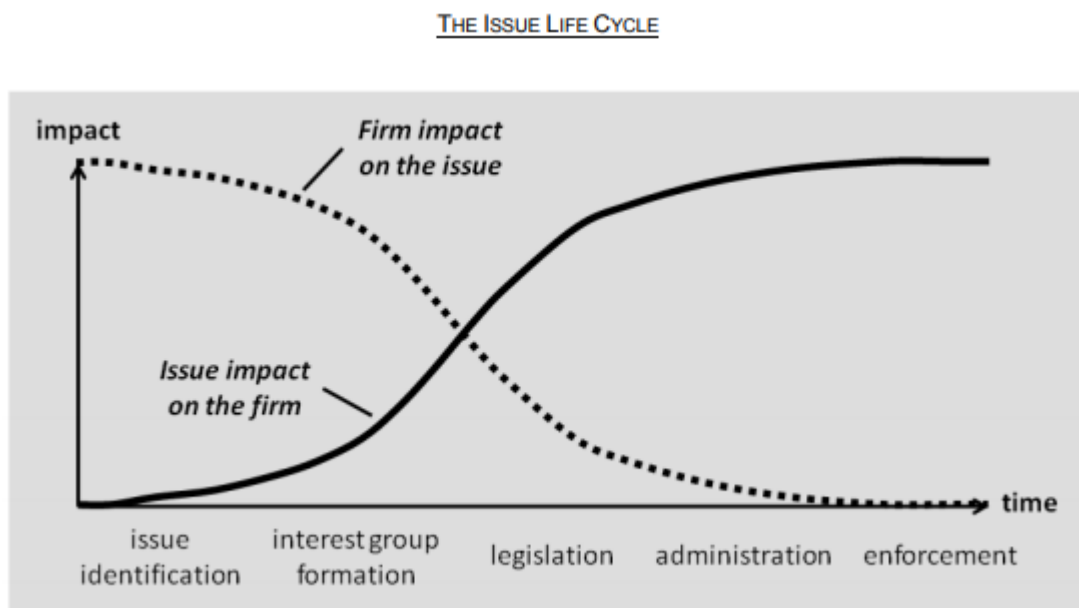


Figure 1. The lifecycle of an issue by David Barons (1995).

Scholars identified multiple discursive legitimation strategies for companies. Seidl et al., (2012) determined two discursive strategies in which companies can choose to follow, depending on the extent to which they can deviate from social compliance with the goal of saving change costs and maintaining operations, these strategies are either to comply to social pressures or to explain and justify the company’s inertia or deviation (Seidl et al., 2012). Another study by Oliver and Holzinger (2008) defines two discursive legitimation strategies. First is compliance to stakeholder norms and values, either a firm can maintain value in reactive short term strategies, or it can anticipate the public in establishing best practices. Compliance can be applied in discourse while used in communications with stakeholders. The second strategy is influential; it can be used for a firm’s proactive response to external trends and redefines public opinion to fit firm strategies (Vionera & Van Kranenburg, 2017). These studies show response strategies that show the stance of a company

facing social pressures. On a higher level, in linking these strategies to a timespan, a strategy of promising reform emerges. Seidl et al. (2012) suggest that promising reform achieves discursive legitimation by segregating the present reality from a possible better future though attempting to gain acceptance for deviating from current practices by pointing to a future time when they will be in compliance (Seidl et al., 2012; Oliver, 1991). Furthermore, the strategy of improvement is based on the argument type of comparison between a worse and a better position and implies a positive movement from the one to the other (Sillince & Brown, 2009). The next paragraph will talk about studies on discursive strategies that react to different tones and arguments from the public.

Some companies seek legitimation through partnerships and alliances. According to Kishna et al. (2016), it could happen in three ways, technology-sourced market legitimacy, technology-sourced social legitimacy and technology legitimacy. The end product of a joint effort across companies enables the acquisition of the legitimacy of the organizations that develop, sell and promote the emerging technology or product (e.g. Hekkert et al., 2007; Markard et al., 2016). The result would be an increased legitimacy for the participating partners by demonstrating joint efforts to address a salient issue. Therefore, whenever a company engages in a joint effort in the research and development of new products and services, to announce and report these efforts counts as a discursive legitimation strategy.

Discursive legitimation strategies directly interact with stakeholders. Yet the reason why this interaction occurs in the first place is because of the nature of a company's social interaction with the public, or due to certain company practices that attract public attention. Therefore, studying the discursive aspect of legitimacy is important for this study because discourse can create an interactive exchange of information between a firm and its stakeholders. A firm can release a statement announcing a new initiative, and the public can respond through multiple channels in approval or disapproval. The result of this interaction can determine the reputation and the public perception of the company. In the next section, I will discuss the definition of CSR and why it is relevant in the context of company sustainability legitimacy.

## 2.2 Corporate social responsibility

In this section, I will define the term of corporate social responsibility. Then I will talk about CSR communication and CSR communication strategies that and their importance in shaping a company's social initiatives.

### 2.2.1 Definition

As the company's best agent to approach stakeholder moral interests, corporate social responsibility represents the company's willingness to participate with societal concerns. It is the "company's role in, and impact upon, the economic, environmental and social framework in which it is embedded" (Golob et al., 2013: p.3; Crane et al., 2004). CSR refers to a company's voluntary commitment to contribute to the betterment of society, and it has progressively become a more prevalent business agenda (Rim & Song, 2017). Nowadays, most companies have CSR programs that stay in contact with society's trends. In the light of increased mediums and channels of communication between firms and consumers, more CSR strategies evolved to meet these trends. To better understand this, I will go through previous studies on CSR strategies and what findings are relevant within the topic of this thesis.

Most studies on CSR mention the importance of a firm to appear benevolent, the argument of "doing well by doing good" proves this point (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2004; Wood, 1991). Scholars have defined 4 dimensions for CSR, (Carroll, 1991), First, *Economic responsibility*: firms have to sell socially desirable products that must be profitable; Second, *Legal responsibility*: meeting social expectations as established by law; Third, *Ethical responsibility*: Behaving in a manner that is deemed morally correct; Finally, *Philanthropic responsibility*: getting involved in the betterment of society (Dutot et al., 2016). Further studies have explored CSR communication strategies; this was to highlight the importance of how to communicate a company's social initiatives, and not just to possess them. In the next section we shall discuss CSR communication studies and why they matter in the context of legitimacy.

### 2.2.2 CSR communication

CSR communication is often about communicating CSR. This means that it is about using promotional techniques that are directed at informing the public about companies' CSR activities and actively supporting CSR-based brand identity and reputation. Furthermore, it does so by displaying

the social role a company plays towards a territory, context and community (Golob et al., 2013; Orlitzky et al., 2003; Czinkota et al., 2014). “The objective of CSR communication is addressed as a holistic framework for how to deal with processes of CSR from an intra- and inter-organisational development perspective, in which co-creation and negotiation play a significant role for anchoring CSR as sense-making in and around the organisation” (e.g. Basu and Palazzo, 2008; Golob et al., 2013: p.5). Conceptualizing, planning and carrying out CSR messages to customers, consumers, media, NGOs, authorities, etc., are framed as key drivers for enhancing a business image and reputation (Golob et al., 2013). We can relate this functionalistic approach or CSR to discourse, and discursive legitimacy. Golob et al.’s (2015) use the term “CSR messages” when explaining CSR communication, which treats it as a conduit that “communicates” and displays a firm’s contributions to society. Successful CSR communication enhances a firm-stakeholders transparency that facilitates the legitimization and reputation of a company (Golob et al., 2013).

Scholars have defined various strategies for CSR communication that contribute in the formation of organizational legitimacy. Elanor Colleoni’s (2013) work on organizational legitimacy defines three communication strategies. *Self-centered*, which defines a company’s sustainability agenda internally based on corporate feedback on legitimacy. *Mediated*, which uses experts as a third party that conveys messages and connects stakeholders and corporations in dialogue. Finally, *dialogical*, which involves an immediate feedback loop caused by direct stakeholder-corporate interaction. These strategies were studied in the theme of social media, particularly at seeking information from the public interactively. Other scholars studied organizational legitimacy from a different approach. Farache (2010) demonstrated advertisement as a genre of CSR communication strategies that contribute to reinforce organizational legitimacy. Strategies such as *repetition* reinforce increases consumer awareness. In her article she also studies advertisement as a method to change stakeholder expectations from a company. Furthermore, Kim & Rader (2010) defined a set of strategies for the concepts of corporate ability and social responsibility communication; these strategies were then compared so see how they were combines to achieve organizational legitimacy. These strategies are generalizable as they were studied on Fortune 500 companies and found different combinations of these strategies being employed depending on the company’s long-term objectives. Another CSR communication strategy is *message sidedness*, where firms can communicate their CSR agenda in messages that are either one-sided, which present only supportive and positive arguments or attributes of their product. Or two-sided, disclaim minor product traits while affirming positive claims that improve brand credibility (Etgar and Goodwin, 1982 from Rim & Song, 2017) this message-sidedness strategy helps companies convey the image it wants the public to see, especially

when dealing with negative comments. There is more literature on organizational legitimacy, such as CSR, e-reputation and political activity for Hond et al., (2014), and CSR and e-reputation through social media for Dutot et al., (2016). However, the already mentioned studies were the closest to the themes of CSR and legitimacy that affects a company's image and legitimacy in the of context sustainability.

For this thesis, the most relevant CSR communication strategies were those of Kim & Rader's (2010). The reason why the rest were less critical for the study is as follows. The strategies of Colleoni (2013) apply in relatively short time periods of stakeholder-corporate immediate interactions. This is effective in contexts of short-term interactions for temporary trends, to match between stakeholder expectation and CSR agendas. These strategies focus more on the reciprocal corporate-stakeholder communication rather than company self-presentation, and in the context of this study, the latter is more relevant (Colleoni, 2013). The strategy of *message sidedness* is less significant for the same reason of short-term company-stakeholder interaction (Etgar and Goodwin, 1982). Furthermore, Farache's (2010) CSR advertisement strategies have proven to be an effective marketing approach for CSR communication, and they are relevant in proving stakeholder responsiveness and public opinion over the legitimacy of companies, as well as in environmental contexts. However, the thesis focuses on all content (both marketing and non-marketing related) that reflects the company's self-presentation rather than its promotional image. On the other hand, Kim and Rader's (2010) framework is more important for this thesis due to its analysis of Fortune 500 companies and proving the long-term use of different strategies. Combinations of six CSR and six corporate ability communication strategies (CAb) that play a principal role in CSR communication. This is directly relevant for the context of organizational legitimacy because it emphasizes on a company's non-promotional self-presentation. Different combinations of these strategies can reflect a company's public perception on longer time periods (Kim & Rader, 2010; Dutot et al., 2016; Carroll, 1978).

First, *corporate ability communication* (CAb), it builds the public's cognitive associations related to an organization's expertise and capabilities in terms of its products and services. It has six individual strategies. Starting with *Expertise in product or service quality*, it reflects an image of trust and consistency in a product or service. *Global success* indicates how widespread are the delivery of a company's products and services globally. The *implementation of quality control programs* represents the degree to which a company is committed to meet operational difficulties and errors overtime. *Industry leadership* and the market share size that gives a company an advantage of trust.

A company's *market orientation*, which matches a company's core values with the needs and wants of the market. And finally, *research and development*, it shows the level of a company's commitment toward improving and creating new products and services. These strategies mainly show the consumer's evaluation of the company (Kim & Rader, 2010).

Second, corporate social responsibility communication (CSRC), it builds corporate associations with stakeholders concerning an organization's social responsibility (Kim & Rader, 2010). Like CAb it also has six separate strategies of communicating a company's CSR agenda to the public. These strategies are as follows. Starting with *environmental stewardship*, it includes the communication of activities related to biodiversity conservation, recycling and sustainability. *Philanthropic contributions*, it involves communicating the activities that consist of donations, aids to humanitarian crises and charity. *Educational commitments*, these activities communicate educational programs, funds for scientific research and scholarships. *Employee involvement* involves communicating activities such as community services and volunteering. *Public health commitments* show the degree to which a company contributes to healthcare and wellbeing. Finally, *sponsorship of cultural activities* communicates a company's support to seasonal festivals and sponsoring cultural events. These strategies participate in the creation of an overall positive impact on society and on the company's public perception (Kim & Rader, 2010).

These CSR communication strategies are used to demonstrate a company's CSR agenda. The bridge the company's activities that create results (e.g. philanthropic contributions: actual donations) with making these activities visible and explicit. Communicating these activities is by definition, discursive (Oswick et al., 2005). This discursive element in the strategies of CSRC/CAb communication manifests in the form of texts, press releases, and announcements and other verbal ways of communication. The six CSRC and six CAb communication strategies are a way of publicly expressing a company's intentions. Which show its actual activities as socially engaged, with the final goal of contributing to the betterment of society and consequently gaining social approval (Rim & Song, 2017).

Kim and Rader (2010) also mentioned the concept of a hybrid CSR communication strategy which describes a combination of both CAb and CSRC strategies. It is important to note that Kim & Rader found that 83% of Fortune's 500 companies adopt a hybrid CSR communication strategy. This means that a company in this category includes at least one of the six communication strategies for each of CAb and CSRC. As a result, it is important for a company to engage in these strategies as it



grows in size. That also increases the possibility of receiving public scrutiny, while the social expectations of the company increase as well. However, the only strategies which directly tackle the issues of plastic waste are the CAb communication strategies of *global success* and *research and development*, and the CSRC communication strategy of *environmental stewardship*. These three strategies combined, form a hybrid strategy by definition. Table (1) shows both the CAb and CSRC strategies, for reasons of simplicity their combined hybrid form will be referred to as CSR communication strategies (Kim & Rader, 2010):

<b>Dimension</b>	<b>Corporate Ability Communication Strategy</b>	<b>Corporate Social Responsibility Communication Strategy</b>
1	Expertise in product or service quality	<u>Company's environmental stewardship</u>
2	<u>Global success</u>	Philanthropic contribution
3	Implementation of a quality control program	Educational commitments
4	Industry leadership	Employee involvement
5	Market orientation	Public health commitments
6	<u>Efforts in innovation and R&amp;D</u>	Sponsorship of cultural activities.

Table 1. The dimensions of CAb and CSR by Kim & Rader, (2010)

To measure the performance of CSR, Igalens and Gond (2003) proposed five levels of measurement, and Kim & Rader, added 2 more, consecutively these are *contents of monthly reports*, *pollution indicators*, *values extracted from questionnaires*, *corporate reputation*, *audits produced by external organizations*, *company activity on social media*, and *online measurement of content* (Igalens & Gond, 2003; Kim & Rader, 2010). Since my thesis is focused on sustainability, the pollution measurement level creates a good link between CSR communications with firm legitimacy in sustainability.

Now that we have defined CSR communication strategies, it is time to link these strategies to discursive legitimization strategies and integrate them in the area of sustainability and plastic waste. This should help us analyse a company's sustainability agenda.

## 2.3 Discursive Legitimacy and CSR communication, the link to sustainability

In this section, I will define the connection between CSR and legitimacy. After that, I shall explain the term of sustainability and how the theory that has been previously discussed will fit into the context of sustainability in this thesis. I will also discuss the mediums that stakeholders use to direct their judgement on companies. Finally, I will clarify this connection on a strategic level, linking CSR communication strategies and discursive legitimization strategies.

### 2.3.1 Legitimacy and CSR

CSR has a direct connection with a company's legitimacy and reputation (Czinkota et al., 2014). Since CSR aims to "give back to society", by definition, its activities are inseparable from social perception. From an ethical perspective, we can justify the connection between CSR and when reviewing legitimacy theory, because it explains how various corporate ethical practices can serve to legitimize corporate operations (Joutsenvirta & Vaara, 2009). Furthermore, CSR agrees with the 'doing well by doing good' argument (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2004; Wood, 1991). As Palazzo and Scherer argued, "current conceptualization of CSR assumes that legitimacy is based on conformity with societal rules" (Palazzo & Scherer, 2016: p.7). Since a company's objective is to make money, the concept agrees with investing in CSR initiatives while they participate in earning extra profits (Palazzo & Scherer, 2016). Overall, CSR enhances the legitimacy of firm activities in various contexts, particularly when looking at it from a moral perspective (Aldrich & Fiol, 1995; Schuman). As a result, CSR's concept of "giving back to society" and its engagement in social activities contribute by definition to the legitimization of a firm as a morally and socially responsible entity.

In this study, I look at CSR as the organizational values that legitimizing activities fall back and refer to. I then look at CSR communication as the base where a company uses discursive legitimacy. Since CSR is the company's tangible contributions and action toward society (donations, environmental projects, philanthropic initiatives), discursive legitimization strategies serve as the communication methods that protect a company's legitimacy and insure the intention of its CSR are well communicated. Moreover, discursive legitimization strategies depend on a company's CSR initiatives.

### 2.3.2 Sustainability

Sustainability development is the "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." (WCED, 1987: 43).

Corporate sustainability is defined as the strategies that aim at ‘balancing the social, environmental and economic needs of both the company and society’ (Epstein and Roy, 2001, p. 586 from Engert & Baumgartner, 2015). Sustainability sciences can be defined as the study of the interactions between society, economy and ecology, and with their social and natural environment and their sustainability implications (Islam, 2004). The notion of sustainability is widely adopted in organisational processes, regardless of the industry type. Many studies have compared between firms with sustainable practices and firms without them, and the findings favour firms with sustainable practices by scholars such as Baumgartner & Rauter (2016), Engert & Baumgartner (2015), McDonald et al. (2006), Kishna et al. (2017) Brønn & Vidaver-Cohen (2009), Czinkota et al. (2014), Christensen & Cheney (2011) and many others.

Since corporate reputation (an evaluation of a firm by its stakeholders) is closely related to concepts such as legitimacy, corporate image, and corporate identity (Bitektine, 2011; King and Whetten, 2008), it helps organizations to achieve a competitive advantage (Hond et al., 2013). Sustainable practices or corporate sustainability-development goals help achieve the goals of corporate social responsibility which in turn influence organizations, individuals and groups (Baumgartner & Rauter, 2016), meeting the expectations of stakeholders, and resulting in an improved corporate reputation. Therefore, sustainable activities can be included among other CSR activities.

### 2.3.3 Stakeholder perception

It is important to remember that the objective of CSR communication and discursive legitimization strategies is to achieve a positive stakeholder perception. Thus I shall underline this by explaining stakeholder perception with CSR communication strategies, and then on the mediums in which stakeholders express their level of satisfaction with company activities (Sustainable practices in particular). Consequently, define its legitimacy in sustainability.

With regard to CSR communication strategies by Kim and Rader (2010) and in the findings of Dutot et al (2016), Stakeholder perception is manifested in both corporate ability communication strategy (CAb) and corporate social responsibility communication strategy (CSRC). These strategies influence the e-reputation of a company. This is not an either or situation, a firm can choose to select both CAb and CSRC strategies simultaneously. CAb refers to how a consumer judges a company based on its high-quality products or services and expertise, whereas CSRC refers to how a consumer

judges a company based on its strong sense of corporate citizenship with social, environmental, and/or political issues (Rim & Song, 2017). Here, both concepts contribute in the shaping of stakeholder perception.

Moving to the mediums of CSR and discursive communication, media is one important player in the legitimization process since it holds leverage on public opinion. Discursive legitimacy is a result of firms professing the prospects for communication operating as a ‘true dialogue’ is limited by the parallel desire for control, consensus and consistency, particularly in social media settings (Schultz et al., 2013; Golzer, Caruana & Hibbert, 2018). Some propose that social media present a unique opportunity to forge a dialogical pathway within legitimacy theory (Golzer et al., 2018). Studies on discursive legitimization mention newspapers as a point of interaction between company activities and stakeholder opinion (Vaara et al., 2006). Furthermore, environmental activist groups serve as “watch dog” institutions that aim to keep company activities aligned with social demands (Voinea & van Kranenberg, 2017). Through social media, news articles and announcements, the press and activists form an integral part of public opinion that will determine a company’s legitimacy in sustainability. In the method section, these two types of stakeholders will be explained with more detail.

#### 2.3.4 Sustainability’s link to CSR and discursive legitimization strategies

In order to manage organizational legitimacy in sustainability, a firm should have well established social initiatives. “Corporate sustainability strategies describe how sustainability issues are dealt with in practice.” (Baumgartner & Rauter, 2016: p.2). They could improve profitability, enhance reputation, and strengthen employee commitment to the firm (Brønn & Vidaver-Cohen, 2009). These initiatives or “Corporate environmental management” activities can be in the form of sustainable practices, environmental initiatives and produce sustainable products (Poison-de Haro & Bitektine, 2015). Accordingly, a firm must have clear CSR programs to fit-in these initiatives. But, to ensure a successful communication, discursive legitimization strategies must match the company’s CSR communication strategies. The company’s communication channels will have to adopt certain discursive legitimization strategies to ensure the impact of these sustainable practices. A lack of CSR communication strategies sets no tone for a company’s legitimacy to fall back to. CSR communication strategies make it easier to preserve consistency for a firm’s perception, serving as a reference where it could select or deselect discursive strategies more fittingly. This applies to both legitimization and delegitimation, whether a company is being praised or criticized.

As a company selects its CSR communication strategies, it then decides what discursive legitimization strategies are appropriate for its context. Finally, stakeholders, such as newspapers, environmental groups and people on social media, can either endorse and-support a company's current activities, or they can criticize and judge the company. This public perception can either reinforce or damage a firm's legitimacy in sustainability. See figure (2) below:

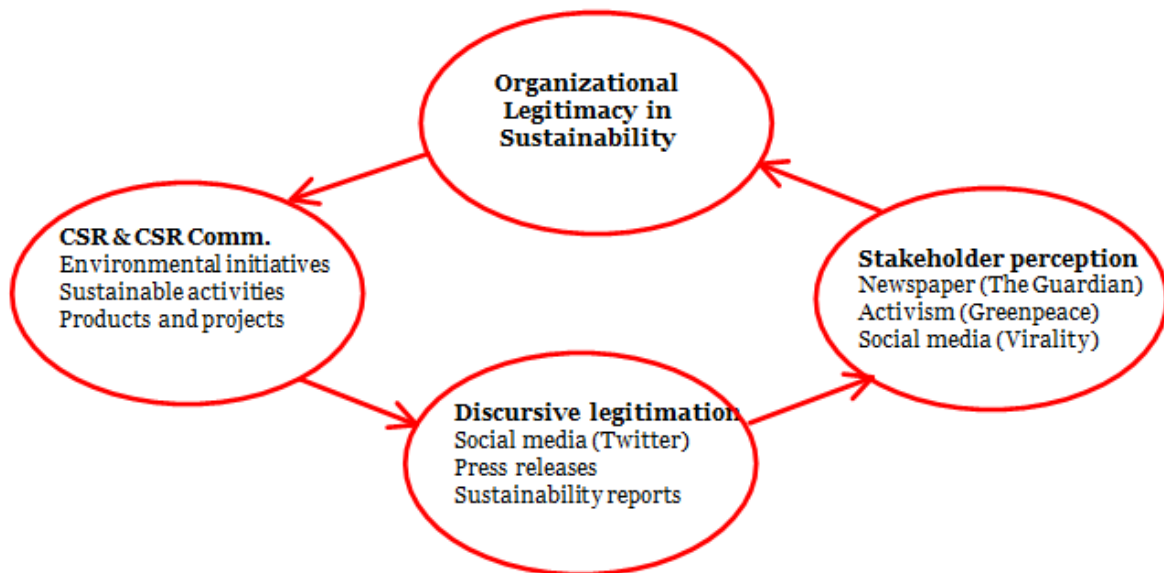


Figure 2. The conceptual model for organizational legitimacy in sustainability.

## 2.4 Summary

To conclude, this theoretical review helped us understand the way legitimization works. It also helped us see how CSR communication strategies and discursive legitimization strategies are linked together in shaping the stakeholder perspective. We now know that companies adopt sustainable development and sustainable practices to acquire legitimacy (Zimmerman & Zeitz, 2002). Thus, discursive legitimization strategies would serve as an effective tool along with CSR communication strategies to achieve firm legitimacy in sustainability. The literature in of CSR and discursive legitimization both aim to justify or to gain approval for company activities. In the light of today's world, the internet and social media facilitate the rapid exchange of information which educates and raises the awareness of people on ecological concerns. Both CSR communication and discursive legitimacy possess strategies that provide the necessary tools to react to these environmental issues to a company's benefit.

Evidence shows that adopting sustainable practices is not definitive remedy for firms to become legitimate. Some invest significantly in sustainability, but their efforts are still viewed as unsustainable or negative toward the environment. Companies with sustainable practices are not invulnerable to environmental criticism, yet some prevail as “likable” by stakeholders, while others are opposed and criticized. This means that there must be a discursive strategic path that encourages public perception to view firms sustainably legitimate. This literature review summarizes a variety of strategies on legitimacy, which should help us in the process of identifying the set of company strategies used over time which might differ in type and in context. My purpose is to study the discursive strategies that make sustainable practices in firms legitimate or illegitimate to the view of the public, by comparing companies existing sustainable practices and discursive legitimation strategies, and why some are successfully legitimate while others aren’t, in spite of proper implementation of sustainable practices.

### 3.0 Method

In this section, I explain my methodology by first presenting the empirical setting and context of legitimacy in sustainability. To do this, I must first briefly explain how plastic waste became an issue, and what important events triggered a legitimation crisis for companies to be driven toward sustainability. Next, I will name the three companies and the reasons why they were selected for the thesis. There, I will also briefly go through the history of each in CSR and sustainability and what have they achieved in the fight against plastic. Later, I shall talk about the data collection; the sources that I selected, how and why I chose them for my study. Finally, I will show my plan of analysis of the data, and how I intend to answer my research question with the given resources.

#### 3.1 Empirical setting

##### 3.1.1 A brief history of plastic waste

The first modern plastic was invented in 1907 by Leo Baekeland, it was used as an electric insulator for a “rapidly electrifying [USA]” (Science history, 2016). But its widespread consumption came 40 years later, when the first plastic bottles were made in the 1940’s. The item outcompeted glass bottling, making its logistical operations more efficient due to its lighter weight and high resistance to breaking (Hopewell, Dvorak, & Kosior, 2009). Soon after that, the food processing industry quickly adopted plastic bottles and developed it to accommodate and pack its vast array of products.

The years passed and as the global population increased so did the consumption of plastic products. More consumption meant more plastic packages as plastic waste, the ecological impact of plastic waste doubled every 20 years (Grün, 2016). The ecological impact was first noticed during the 1970's, but only esthetical attention was given to the problem, as the people were disturbed by beach pollution. By the end of the 1980's, most impacts of marine litter were well understood, its effects contaminating underground water by landfills, and the toxicity of its burned smoke to human health (Ryan, 2015). The large debates about plastic becoming a global problem happened between 1985 and 1988, when a team of researchers from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) first proposing the probability of the existence of a large area highly concentrating plastic waste debris floating in the North Pacific, also known as oceanic plastic gyres. This happened to be true in 1997 when Charles Moore, a sailor and environmentalist from California confirmed it in an exploratory trip (De Guren, 2018). Today we know of five such plastic gyres across the planet. In spite of this, it has only become a globally salient problem in recent years. Newspapers, activists and governments began to address the plastic waste problem.

Over the last twenty years, there is more awareness on the issue and scientists have amassed much evidence of the impact of human pollution on the environment (Oriordan, 1993). People are becoming increasingly aware on the environmental damage caused by companies. Pressures that demand results from companies increased over time, and company activities are vulnerable to virality and environmental deviance. Consequently, companies are forced to respond. Moreover, new ethical expectations have risen along with a set of contingent social responsibilities that corporations are now asked to fulfil by the various groups of stakeholders in society (Moreno and Capriotti, 2009; retrieved from Colleoni, 2013). And with the rise of social media, issues are broadcasted much faster, requiring additional organizational precautions.

### 3.1.2 International efforts to fight plastic waste and pollution

Before the fight against plastic began, the first international environmental efforts were more generic. It began in Stockholm 1972. The first global environmental act with the title of *"Declaration of the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment"*, The goal of that convention was to officially introduce international environmental laws worldwide, and improve international collaboration to reduce human harm to the environment (Handl, n.d.). The Montreal protocol of 1989 aimed to the reduction of human products that harm the ozone layer and the Kyoto

protocol of 1995 the objective was to reduce greenhouse gasses and the carbon footprint resulting from burning fossil fuels. The Millennium development goals off 2000 had 8 goals set to achieve by 2015. The goals were to eradicate extreme poverty, child mortality, Malaria and HIV, provide worldwide primary education, improved maternal health and ensure environmental sustainability (United Nations Millennium Development Goals, n.d.). The sustainability goals of the millennium development goals included preserving biodiversity, access to sustainable drinking water and preventing the loss of environmental resources. None of these goals addressed ocean pollution or plastic waste as a target.

It wasn't until 2015 that one international effort to solve the plastic waste problem was announced. The United Nations announced the 2015 UN sustainability development goals (UNSDG). The objective is for companies and governments to achieve 17 goals by 2030; encouraging companies and governments to behave more sustainably, using earth's resources more responsibly and efficiently, and matching human benefit with the longevity of the planet's resources. Among these goals, are goal number 12 which is sustainable consumption and production patterns, as well as goal number 14 which is the conservation and sustainable use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development (UNSDG, 2015). These two goals are relevant for the issue of plastic waste and pollution.

Even though there were many previous environmental agreements, none addressed plastic waste as a target (Vidal, 2012). Unlike former UN environmental acts and conventions; the UNSDG targets not only governments, but also youth, entrepreneurs, companies and individuals. Some companies even mention hashtags on social media with #SDG (sustainability development goals) when talking about their environmentalist agendas. This concludes my motives to select the UNSDG of 2015 as the key event that called a collective effort against plastic among other things. For studying the sustainability legitimacy of the companies, the launching date of the UNSDG (September 25<sup>th</sup> 2015) will be the reference that demonstrates firm changes and attitudes toward plastic waste.

### 3.2 Case selection

The 3 cases selected are critically acclaimed companies from the fortune 500 that are engaged in sustainability agendas, while being responsible for plenty of the plastic waste ending up in the oceans. These companies from the food processing industry are controversial, as they are ranked among the most reputable top 100 companies in the world in 2013, while at the same time being both



criticized and praised by Greenpeace (Smith, 2013 June). Since they are from a similar industry, the topic of interest is independent from firm structure and more focused on firm perception. Therefore, the structural differences between the companies are relatively small and will not be critical in the formation of sustainable legitimacy.

### 3.2.1 Nestlé

Nestlé was founded in 1868, with focus on nutrition using the slogan of “Good food, good life”. It succeeded by selling healthy affordable products as alternatives to mothers that couldn’t feed their children. In the first half of the 20th century, they expanded into countries around the world producing new food and milk with an addition of chocolate and coffee to their production lines. Through the second half of that century, it expanded its production lines into other industries via Mergers and acquisitions. In 2006, Nestlé decided to follow the business concept of Creating Shared Value and driving sustainable profitable growth (Nestlé annual report, 2006). In 2009 it announced the coca plan working to get 100 percent of its chocolate portfolio using certified sustainable cocoa and sustainable growing techniques. In other activities, the company participated in community development activities and of philanthropy with the Red Cross IFRC.

The company prides itself as an active contributor in the betterment of society across the globe. It leads nutrition and clean water projects in poor countries, encourages female empowerment programs, food waste management, sanitation, health, reduction of carbon emissions and other sustainable activities that make it rank 50th in the “Global 100 Most Sustainable Corporations in the World” index of 2018 (The magazine for clean capitalism, 2018 January; UN Foundation, 2018). In spite of the company’s achievements that frame it a sustainability paragon, Nestlé has been under fierce criticism regarding various subjects, such as deforestation of rain forests for palm oil, and of being responsible for plastic waste in its products. To combat these issues in a discursive manner, I observe how the firm reacts to public pressures.

### 3.2.2 Danone

“Bringing health through food to as many people as possible” is the mission statement of Danone. The company is a foods and beverages producer that makes products that are health oriented. The company promotes wellbeing in saying “We believe a healthy body needs healthy food. And healthy food needs a healthy planet.” (Danone, n.d.). It already started promoting “Good nutrition” in 1991, and has been careful to maintain a positive image to consumers as an entity that cares for consumer

health. Its first company act for environmental preservation was in 1998 by signing the Ramsar international convention on protecting wetlands. In 2001, it launched initiatives that combine business success with responsibility to employees, stakeholders and the environment (Danone, n.d.).

In 2008 the company set up the Danone Fund for Nature to develop and provide funding innovative carbon offset programs. And since 2009 it became heavily immersed in sustainability and sustainability development. That year, it began the Danone Ecosystem Fund which is an initiative that co-creates innovative business solutions with non-for-profit organizations that generate social and economic value for small players in local economies. The company expanded local distribution systems, packaging recycling networks, personal services, and socioeconomic development (Danone, n.d.). In 2013, Danone made commitments to be achieved by 2020: climate, water, packaging, and agriculture. To fight climate change, protect water resources, transform waste into a resource, and promote sustainable agriculture (Danone, n.d.). In 2017, the company developed a plant-based portfolio to encourage better-healthier choices of food for the health of people and the planet (Danone, n.d.).

However, it is not without its environmental controversies. It too has participated in the deforestation of Indonesian rainforests for the cultivation of palm oil, and blamed for plastic pollution.

### 3.2.3 Unilever

Formerly a Dutch company and an English company, Unil and Lever merged to Unilever which was founded in 1930, working with oil, cosmetic and hygiene products. Using the slogan of “Adding vitality to life”, like Danone and Nestlé, it too is focused on projecting a responsible image towards health. In the beginning, their products were directed towards women: “to lessen work for women, to foster health and contribute to personal attractiveness”. Decades later, it expanded its industry into food processing. The company expanded throughout the years and became a multinational that is concerned about human rights, gender equality and supporting agricultural activities in 3<sup>rd</sup> world countries.

In 2009, it joined the non-profit organization “Climate Savers Computing Initiative” focused on efficient energy consumption for electronics. It was on the Dow Jones sustainability index from 1999 until 2010. It stood against deforestation in 2009, as well as philanthropic activities such as donating \$500,000 to Haiti’s 2010 earthquake. Since 2010, the company announced its determination to

reduce its environmental footprint, and ever since, its press releases concerning the environment increases exponentially till today. However, like the other companies it also received criticism. With regard to plastic pollution, Unilever has been blamed to be among the top plastic waste offenders, it too experienced environmental public pressure.

### 3.3 Data collection

The type of material collected is textual content. It shows public opinion on the relevant subjects of study in the form of textual statements through various mediums. There is abundant information on each stage for this study. In addition, the information in these sources contains the dates on which each event occurred. This can help us track the progression of plastic waste issues and sustainability over time, particularly in considering the UNSDG as a reference event.

Due to the textual (discursive) nature of the analysis, this study's methodology will be qualitative. Note that the content that has been coded contains keywords and phrases that are relevant to the context of the study in the tone of sustainability and plastic waste. This was done by using the following keywords: *sustainability*, *plastic*, *landfills*, *recyclable*, *reusable*, *renewable* and *packaging*.

To search for content on public opinion, the data is divided into two categories. The first category is used to find patterns that identify the CSR communication and discursive legitimization strategies for all three companies. The second category helps us understand public perception toward the companies' stance on sustainability and plastic waste, whether they support or condemn company activity.

#### 3.3.1 First data category: identifying strategies

For the first category, I collected the data from all 3 companies in the form of Company twitter activity, Sustainability reports and press releases. This data contains patterns that help reveal the company's CSR communication strategies and discursive legitimization strategies.

To identify a company's CSR communication strategies that are related to sustainability and plastic waste, I use a set of three strategies from both theories of Kim and Rader (2010). Instead of seeking all 6 strategies of CSRC and all 6 strategies of CAb, from CSRC I use *environmental stewardship*. And from CAb I use *global success* and efforts in *research and development* (see underlined

strategies in table 1, page 16). The reasons why I selected these three CSR communication strategies are due to their relevance to sustainability and to efforts related to plastic waste. By definition, *environmental stewardship* involves activities ranging from biodiversity conservation, recycling and sustainability. *Global success* shows the degree to which how widespread are the delivery of a company's sustainable products and services globally. Finally, efforts in *innovation and research and development* demonstrate the level of a company's commitment toward improving and creating new products and services. In addition, it is worth mentioning that according to Kim and Rader (2010), using a combination of strategies from both theories (CAB and CSRC) make this mix of three communication strategies a "hybrid CSR communication strategy". Although for reasons of simplicity, in this study, they will be referred to as CSR communication strategies. The sources of data to these CSR communication strategies are indicated below.

The first source is Twitter. Companies use twitter to communicate their activities to the public. These activities are in the form of announcements of new projects, reporting the progress of initiatives, and demonstrating their stance toward salient issues. After all, social media is critical tool of immediate communication for companies (Golzer et al., 2018). In addition, Twitter affects the brand image and reputation better than other social media (Ma, Sun and Kekre, 2015). I have collected a total of 529 tweets for all three companies between the dates of September 24<sup>th</sup> 2013 till May 12<sup>th</sup> 2018. This places the UNSDG approximately in the middle of this period, which allows recognizing patterns in strategic and discursive changes over time. This is a period of almost 5 years, should be sufficient to reveal changes in company behaviour using discursive legitimization strategies. These tweets indeed must contain at least one of the mentioned keywords.

The method of collecting the tweets was the same with all 3 companies. I made a twitter account and I used twitter's advanced search settings to list all tweets posted by Danone, Nestlé and Unilever within the mentioned period. After opening the results, I scrolled down the twitter account page of each company from May 12<sup>th</sup> 2018 back to September 24<sup>th</sup> 2013. I then copied all tweets to three separate Microsoft Word files for each firm. To find the keywords, I used Microsoft Word's search tool which allowed me to count and read the relevant tweets for my study. As a result, I was able to observe the evolution of plastic waste as a topic of interest by viewing tweet content and frequency. This contributed to determine when plastic waste gradually became a salient problem. More important, it revealed the tone and patterns of company activity online that help us determine the strategies used for sustainability legitimacy.

The second source is press releases. They are the official front face of a company. They display a company's intentions, announcements, initiatives, promises, projects, achievements, progress, restructuring and commitments to the public. Press releases also show what image the company wants to establish to society. Unlike twitter, press releases communicate to stakeholders with fulfilled descriptions for each topic and facet of a company's activities.

I collected the press releases from the official websites of each company. I have searched for all press releases of the three companies that talk about plastic waste that dated back to 1999. I chose this date because it is the date when Unilever first published a sustainability report, and it was the first one to do so among the three companies. I have collected a total of 25 relevant press releases that directly involve plastic waste and sustainability. Press releases are discursive and they withhold deliberate discursive legitimization elements. Similarly to Twitter, press releases help us understand what a company finds important to officially share with the public.

The final source of data is sustainability reports. These reports show the degree of commitment that a company has for *global success*, *environmental stewardship* and the *research and development of sustainable solutions*. These three (hybrid) CSR communication strategies show a company's sustainable agenda.

Not all companies started publishing sustainability reports in the same year. Unilever's first sustainability report dates back to 1999, and Danone's and Nestlé's date to 2006. I collected all the annual sustainability reports from those dates until the present time of this thesis, and they were all available online on each company's official website. Sustainability reports can be discursive, especially when employed in demonstrating company actions and values toward the public, and they can help us understand a company's CSR agenda that reflects its CSR communication strategies.

### 3.3.2 Second data category: identifying public perception

For the second category, I collected the data from Greenpeace and *The Guardian* newspaper. These two sources contain data that helps us reveal the evolution of plastic waste, and public opinion on each company's sustainable activities. These sources are indicated below.

The first source for identifying public perception is *The Guardian* newspaper. Because its audiences are well-travelled urban consumers with an open minded liberal mindset, this makes them more

interested in environmental and ecological activism. These are typically center-left liberal people that tend to be interested in human rights. Therefore, *The Guardian* readers are more likely to share its articles to create a greater viral impact, and increase the saliency of subjects of the reader's concern, whether the articles endorse and report positive remarks of a firm's action, or if it is perceived as negative behaviour. Furthermore, it is a well-established renowned newspaper that provides explicit information on company announcements from an environmentally-friendly bias. Its articles express both approval and criticism on company environmental actions.

I found 68 articles in *The Guardian* newspaper for the 3 companies that talk about sustainable and environmental issues. I analyzed 18 of them because they directly tackle the problems connected to plastic waste and sustainability, such as microplastics, plastic bottling, R&D on plastic, bio plastics and recycling plastic. The rest of the articles concerned issues that are not directly involved in plastic waste such as palm-oil production, deforestation and carbon emissions.

*The Guardian* has an archive of all its articles for both Unilever and Nestlé. As for Danone, perhaps due to its smaller size in comparison to the other two companies, it had no separate archive. To search for articles on Danone, I wrote "Danone" on *The Guardian*'s search bar to find relevant results. Then I searched for all the results that mentioned Danone's and the coded keywords that are relevant to plastic waste in its articles. This search dated back to 1999.

An additional facet in *The Guardian* articles is that each article published online showed the number of times that it was shared on Facebook. This helps me observe the virality of each article on the subject of plastic waste, and indicate the impact of the shared content. In addition, it contributes in determining when plastic waste started to become more salient, particularly with regard to public sentiment toward the three companies.

The second source for identifying public perception is Greenpeace. It is an international organization that has been battling corporate and governmental acts that harm the environment. It is a "Watch dogs" type of non-governmental organisation (Yaziji & Doh, 2009). Its job is to pressurize deviant firms, governments and international institutions to legitimize their social values, norms and needs. I collected 6 articles in which Greenpeace mentioned the 3 companies on plastic issues. These articles were published on their official website.

There was one additional data source by Greenpeace that helped me understand the saliency of plastic waste overtime. This source is the number of Tweets that Greenpeace posted since 2009 (The first Greenpeace tweet). I collected a total of 391 tweets written by Greenpeace that directly involve the topic of plastic. The purpose of choosing this longer period is to help me observe the saliency of the topic on social media, as well as the approximate time when Greenpeace began to increase its posts that talk about the subject of plastic as a global issue.

To summarize, this concludes a total of 5 sources of data for both data categories. The first category contains company tweets, press releases and sustainability reports. The second category contains Greenpeace and *The Guardian* articles. This arrangement of the data helps find the patterns according to the conceptual model in figure (2). I conclude my data collection section with Table (2) below, which summarizes the number of data collected for each source:

Data categories	Sources of data and information on the topic of plastic waste	Nestlé	Danone	Unilever	Total
First Category (Strategy analysis)	Tweets	223	96	210	529
	Press releases	15	4	6	25
	Sustainability reports	12	13	20	45
Second Category (Perception analysis)	<i>The Guardian</i> articles	10	4	4	18
	Greenpeace articles	4	0	2	6
<i>The Guardian</i> Facebook shares: The purpose is to better understand the virality of each article directed toward the companies					
Greenpeace tweets: They talk about plastic waste and pollution. The purpose is to understand how plastic pollution became more salient over time: 391 tweets					

Table 2. The number of items collected from the sources of data

### 3.4 Data analysis

I start by analyzing the textual content in the collected data, in order to find patterns and create generalizations that lead to a paradigm in sustainability legitimacy. In order to clearly see the evolution of plastic waste as a company legitimacy issue, I organized the data in chronological order. This way, the sustainable stance of the company will be easier to observe over time. I divide the data into two time periods, company and stakeholder activity before the announcement of the UNSDG, and after the UNSDG. Each company has its own way of communicating its sustainability agenda for plastic. Yet some differences may be identified over time.

It is critical to distinguish the roles of CSR communication strategies and discursive legitimation strategies that are used during both periods. First, from a perspective of CSR communication strategies, establishing a reputation requires a positive long-term relationship with the public and a favorable company image (Dutot et al., 2016). This is why it is important for a company to predict future contexts and plan its' long-term CSR strategies while it communicates these CSR activities discursively; Such as announcing changes in a company's core values that result from necessary adaptation to changing public perception. However, this process is gradual and takes a long time to establish a new perception for the company. On the other hand, discursive legitimation strategies can be reactive on the spot of a rising issue. Discursive legitimation strategies are much more flexible and timely, they can address a public comment within the same day, particularly in today's interconnected mediums of communication. I identify the changes that happen for both concepts (CSR communication and discursive legitimation) as different stimuli press each company toward taking action. Therefore, during the analysis, I observe the changes in the strategies according to the environment overtime in a sustainability context. To emphasize, there is a clear difference between a CSR communication strategy and a discursive legitimation strategy. The former represents the company's core values that help the long-term preservation of its image, while the latter is the tools and methods used to establish the desired company image that ensures its legitimacy for the short term. The success of discursive legitimation strategies should be judged by public opinion. The analysis shall reveal how both these concepts contribute toward the public perception on firm sustainability agenda. I explain the structure of analysis as follows.

First, I analyze the first category of data (company tweets, sustainability reports, and press releases). This is to identify the company's CSR stance through its CSR communication strategies. In this phase, I reveal the CSR communication strategies employed for each of the companies. Once identified, I proceed toward analyzing the discursive legitimation strategies used to address the issue of plastic waste. In this phase, I shall identify the direct company interactions toward the environment and sustainability trends on plastic. The result would be the identification of the discursive legitimation strategies used to maintain a firm's legitimacy in sustainability.

Next, I analyze the second category of data (Greenpeace and *The Guardian* articles). This data category will reveal public perception on a company's activities, and eventually defining its sustainability legitimacy. Here, one will be able to see the discursive legitimation/delegitimation strategies used by the public to support or oppose company activities toward the environment and



plastic waste. In this step, I also use the additional available data on the virality (number of Facebook shares) for each *The Guardian* article as an indicator of its impact on public opinion.

I repeat this process of analysis with all three companies once before UNSDG (Before September 25<sup>th</sup> 2015), and once after (After September 25<sup>th</sup> 2015). This order of the analysis is important so that it matches with the conceptual model. Once the analysis is finished, I add a chart that shows how the topic of plastic waste became more salient over time.

In the end, I summarize the findings in the data according to the explained structure. Once I unveil the patterns in the data, I draw my conclusions on the combinations of CSR communication strategies and discursive legitimation strategies that achieve sustainability legitimacy. I shall also be able to explain whether or not public perception created an impact on firm legitimacy in sustainability and whether it influenced its strategies over time. Tables (3) and (4) show the analytical framework of the thesis:

Companies	Before UNSDG		After UNSDG	
Nestlé Danone Unilever	CSR communication strategies	Discursive legitimation strategies	CSR communication strategies	Discursive legitimation strategies

Table 3. The analytical framework for company CSR communication and discursive legitimation strategies.

Public opinion	Before UNSDG	After UNSDG
Greenpeace <i>The Guardian</i> newspaper	Public perception (Legitimation and delegitimation)	Public perception (Legitimation and delegitimation)
	→ Saliency of plastic waste over time →	

Table 4. The analytical framework for public opinion.

## 4.0 Analysis

In this section, I will analyze the data to describe stakeholder perception of company sustainability agendas as well as the legitimation strategies of each company before and after the announcement of the UNSDG. To answer the research question, I must display my findings in chronological order. I will identify discursive legitimation strategies for each company, then the CSR communication strategies and finally public perception. I will provide charts that will help illustrate each finding over time. I will then conclude this section with a brief summary of this analysis.

Before starting the analysis, the following graph helps understanding the history of plastic waste as a trend. Figure (3) shows the number of tweets by Greenpeace mentioning plastic waste over time before and after the UNSDG.

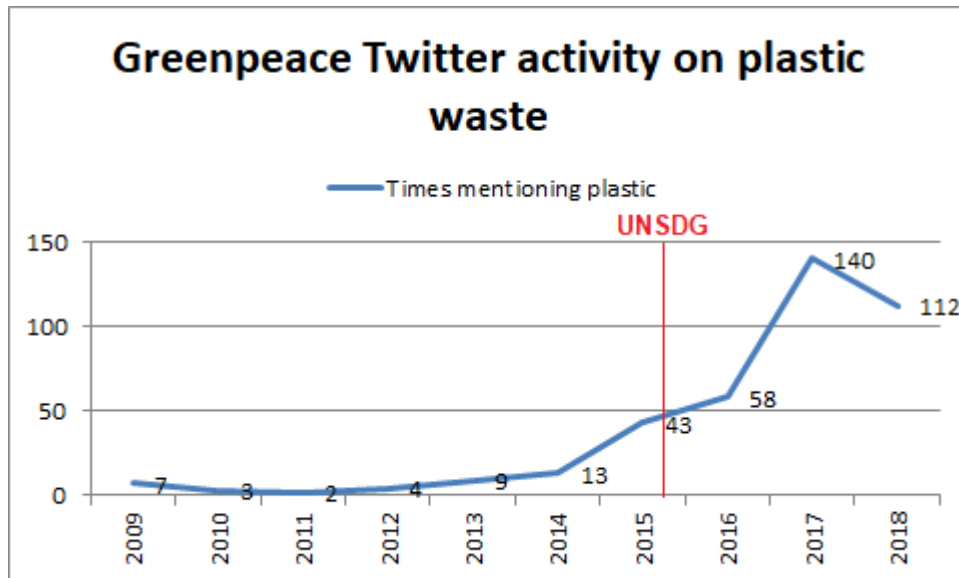


Figure 3. Number of times Greenpeace mentioned the topic of plastic waste on Twitter.

#### 4.1 Before the UNSDG

As shown in Figure (3), the issue of plastic waste started to increase in importance around the year 2013. At the time, some companies had already started considering the issue in its operations, and planned for future reduced impact on the environment. On the other hand, some were slow to react to the increasing importance of the matter. Each company used a set of CSR communication strategies and legitimization strategies to preserve their sustainability legitimacy. As mentioned in the empirical setting, there were no UN initiatives that directly target plastic waste as a topic of focus. Yet this does not imply that the plastic waste problem was not relevant before the UNSDG.

In this subsection, I explored what CSR communication strategies and discursive legitimization strategies dominated the context of plastic waste. In addition, I observed the discursive approach used by *The Guardian* and Greenpeace as a representation of stakeholder perception that defines each company's legitimacy.

##### 4.1.1 Nestlé

The CSR communication strategies

To analyze Nestlé's CSR communication strategies, the information is sourced from sustainability reports. The earliest sustainability report for Nestle was published in 2007. Nestlé's sustainability reports go under the title of "Shared value report". During the first period (Before the UNSDG), Nestlé showed in its reports a focus on nutrition, agricultural development, social development in rural areas of mid-low income countries, and the reduction of its environmental footprint. Yet when it comes to plastic, the main focus was on recycling and research on bio-based plastic alternatives.

To disseminate the CSR communication strategies of Kim & Rader (2010), the sustainability reports show that Nestle did include content about its sustainability and recycling activities. We can assume that the company did apply the CSR communication strategy of environmental stewardship on the plastic waste issues since it textually demonstrated its efforts for recycling programs. However, since its 100% recycling program applied only to 3 cities (2 in the US and 1 in Italy), then we can assume that the company was not able use the CSR communication strategy of global success. Furthermore, the company shared content in all its sustainability reports of its participation in research and development of new materials to substitute fossil-based plastic. This indicates the implementation of the CSR communication strategy of research and development.

Overall, we can conclude that during the first period, Nestlé's CSR communication strategies have excluded global success. That is because did not show or report launching a sustainable product on a global scale, or in applying a recycled technology to one or more of its products worldwide. Yet it did successfully implement the CSR communication strategy of research and development of sustainable innovations. That was possible when informing the launch recycled material to the public (partially and not globally). Furthermore, Nestle did use the CSR communication strategy of environmental stewardship by disclosing its sustainable activities such as recycling and waste reduction (See table 5).

### The discursive legitimation strategies

As for the discursive legitimation strategies, we will have a look at the company's press releases and tweets. Beginning with press releases, the first press release for Nestlé talking about environmental concerns was in 2008, but without directly mentioning plastic related issues. However, more attention to plastic waste started to appear a few years later, in November 19th 2013, the company had a press release talking about developing bioplastics for their products. Furthermore, on Twitter, the company tweeted once in March 11<sup>th</sup> 2014 that they had reduced 66.000 tons of packaging material saving CHF 158 million. It tweeted 2 more times between 2013 and 2015 about research

and development on new bioplastics, as well as sustainable use of plastic bottles (Nestle, 2015 September 20th).

There is an interest in sustainability shown by the efforts to manage plastic waste in Nestlé's operations. Yet the company was not conveying clearly its message of placing plastic waste-management in the fore-front of its interests, and it did not show any arguments that match with the improvement discursive strategy (Luyckx & Janssens, 2016; Sillince & Brown, 2009). Nestlé's attempts to gain legitimacy were confined to informing the public of a company's efforts on the sustainability agenda (plastic waste sustainability in this case). But without concrete long-term objectives on handling plastic, it is not safe to assume that the company was promising reform on a large scale (Seidl et al., 2012), and without an effort to prove its initiative to improve current efforts.

## Public perception

With regard to stakeholder perception, I analyzed Greenpeace and *The Guardian* articles on Nestlé's behaviour toward plastic waste. Greenpeace had no articles that were directed toward Nestlé during this period. *The Guardian*, on the other hand, did publish articles on Nestlé's sustainable agenda in plastic waste. This includes positive and negative reporting, yet they contribute in shaping the overall opinion of its readers toward the company. *The Guardian* first tackled the plastic waste issue on Nestlé in March 29th 2012 which positively talked about the company's commitment to recycle plastic waste for the plastic packaging. However, the article contained content about the chocolate Easter eggs mentioning the negative environmental impact of plastic waste. That year Nestle produced over 20 million eggs, and the plastic in them was unrecyclable, creating a waste problem. The article was shared on Facebook only once barely having impact and the topic was not viral. Later in May 27th 2015 *The Guardian* but Nestlé for producing unsustainable and unrecyclable coffee pods for a product called "Nespresso". Although this product is user friendly, the problem with it is that it uses single-use coffee pods made of mixed plastic and metal materials that are difficult to recycle. The article was shared on Facebook over 1300 times. The company failed to respond to this problem with its product until more than a year later.

Here, one can assume that *The Guardian* has mentioned Nestlé as a contributor to sustainable development, but at the same time, it criticized it for producing a couple of harmful products to the environment. The problem with these products is that they are made of a mix of metals and plastic, that is unrecyclable due to their composition. However, the newspaper did condemn the company in some of its articles, by providing evidence of unacceptable behaviour, such as Nestlé's lack of

responsiveness toward launching environmentally friendly products. Furthermore, *The Guardian* did not report aggressive scrutiny about Nestlé; however it generally participated in constructing a negative image of the company. It is reasonable to consider that the newspaper used Moralization as a delegitimation strategy, since environmental harmfulness is viewed as inappropriate (Vaara et al., 2006). Table (5) below summarizes the analysis of Nestlé's CSR communication strategies and discursive legitimation strategies, and public perception during the period before the UNSDG.

	CSR communication strategies (Kim & Rader, 2010)	Discursive legitimation strategies
Nestlé's strategies	-Innovations in research and development -Environmental stewardship	-
<i>The Guardian's</i> contribution to the firm's public perception	-Moralization: The articles reported Nestlé's neutral to lacking environmental responsiveness; criticizing some products and questioning firm commitment.	
Greenpeace's contribution to the firm's public perception	-	

Table 5. Nestlé's CSR communication strategies, discursive legitimation strategies, and public perception before UNSDG

#### 4.1.2 Danone

##### The CSR communication strategies

Danone's first sustainability report was in 2006. Throughout a period of 8 years, it focused on the topics of improving nutrition, agricultural development and health issues, reducing its environmental impact such as reduced packaging, and adding value to society by developing young talent. In 2011 the company published in its sustainability report launching 100% bio-based plastic facilities in France, Germany, USA and Great Britain. In the report of that same year, it mentioned plastic recycling as being one of its top 5 major strategic focus areas. In 2008, the company wrote in its sustainability report that it will reduce its plastic carbon footprint a 30% less within 4 years. In the sustainability report of 2013, it managed to exceed that target. That same year it replaced 7 of its brands worldwide with 100% bio-based plastics. Finally, in 2014 the company showed in its sustainability report initiating a social innovation fund, where it invests in research and development to create new plastic materials that are recyclable and made from recycled plastics.

From a perspective of CSR communication strategies, the company shows a clear commitment to sustainability related activities in listing plastic waste on its list of top-5 priorities. That is proof of using the CSR communication strategy of environmental stewardship. In addition, the announced the

replacement of 7 brands with 100% bio-based plastics worldwide, this is a clear application of the CSR communication strategy of global success. Finally, the company mentioned in its sustainability report investing on %100 bio-based plastics, reduce plastic carbon footprint and further development of recyclable materials is an indicator of using the CSR communication strategy of investment in research and development (see table 6).

### The discursive legitimization strategies

To disseminate discursive legitimization strategies from the first data category, we look at press releases and Tweets. As for press releases, the company made sure to communicate progress (Luyckx & Janssens, 2016; Sillince & Brown, 2009). In March 29th 2012, Danone announced a goal of reducing its carbon footprint by 30% within 4 years. Later in October 17th 2013, Danone (in Poland) won a sustainability development award from Forbes. The company had no more press releases related to plastic during this period (Before the UNSDG). Furthermore, we look at the company's Twitter activity. In November 19th 2013, the company announced its interest to improve from petrol-based to plant-based plastics. The company announced working with the World Wildlife Fund on an effort to announce the formation of the Bioplastic Feedstock Alliance. Danone tweeted:

*“As demand for plant-based plastic grows, we’re committed to sourcing responsibly”* (Danone, 2013 November 19)

This was an expression of the company's attitude toward including plant-based plastic production. In July 22nd 2015, Danone announced its contribution to sustainable plastic use, the application was about turning used plastic bottles as asphalt material:

*“What if we created new roads with recycled plastic bottle instead of asphalt ?”* (Danone, 2015 Jul 22)

Therefore, one can conclude by the press releases and tweets, that Danone did use discursive legitimization strategies. It used the strategy of reporting improvement by announcing to the public its support for sustainable use of used plastic bottles. In addition, reporting the company's efforts in developing plant-based materials that are less harmful to the environment (Luyckx & Janssens, 2016; Sillince & Brown, 2009). Furthermore, Danone announced that it will achieve a sustainable goal within 4 years by reducing damaging its environmental impact of plastic. This confirms the use of

proposing a future compliance using the discursive legitimation strategy of promising reform (Seidl et al., 2012). Overall, Danone showed a compliant attitude toward the global issue of plastic waste (Oliver & Holzinger, 2008) (see table 6).

## Public perception

As for public perception, we look at Greenpeace activity and *The Guardian* newspaper. Greenpeace had no article published for Danone related to plastic waste during this period. *The Guardian*, on the other hand, published an article in May 30<sup>th</sup> 2012 endorsing Danone for these ambitious targets and for its proven environmental progress. The article had low virality and was shared only two times on Facebook:

*“Energy use fell by 12% in 2009. Transport emissions were down by 10% between 2009 and 2010 and using recycled materials cut carbon intensity in its packaging, by 6% in the same period. It is also pursuing a Carbon Pact with suppliers and the Danone Fund for Nature, created in 2008, is pursuing five carbon offset programmes in Africa and India.”* (Beavis, 2012 May 30)

Although this article might have had a weak impact due to its low number of Facebook shares, it represents a positive environmental attitude from Danone that reports improvement (Luyckx & Janssens, 2016; Sillince & Brown, 2009). This relieved tone positively affects Danone’s legitimacy in sustainability since it promised permanent riddance from environmentally harmful practices in several of its products.

Danone has shown the willingness to collaborate and show long-term responsiveness environmental concerns. This is evident in exceeding its sustainable goals set for 2013, and by continuing to set long-term targets to reduce its plastic waste impact. In addition, *The Guardian* newspaper reported positive remarks in approving of the company’s sustainable efforts. These publications used a tone that helped Danone to benefits from this as legitimation. Table (6) below summarizes the analysis of Danone’s CSR communication strategies and discursive legitimation strategies, and public perception during the period before the UNSDG.

	CSR communication strategies (Kim & Rader, 2010)	Discursive legitimization strategies
Danone's strategies	-Innovations in Research and development -Environmental stewardship -Global success	-Improvement (Luyckx & Janssens, 2016; Sillince & Brown, 2009)  -Promising reform (Seidl et al., 2012)
<i>The Guardian's</i> contribution to the firm's public perception	Reporting active environmental responsiveness, the benefits that companies can obtain from sustainability.	
Greenpeace's contribution to the firm's public perception	-	

Table 6. Danone's CSR communication strategies, discursive legitimization strategies, and public perception before UNSDG

### 4.1.3 Unilever

#### The CSR communication strategies

Before Unilever published its first sustainability report, it was on the Dow Jones sustainability index from 1999 till 2010. Its first sustainability report that was available online was for the year 2000, and it had the name of "Unilever environmental performance report". Up until 2004, it focused on agricultural development, fishing practices and water preservation programs. Then, in 2004 and 2005, the name of the report was changed to "Environmental and social report", here the company added environmental footprint to agriculture, fish and water, education, rural development, and also aiming to raise awareness on sustainability.

As for plastic, from 2006 till 2009 Unilever's reports were called "Sustainable development report". It announced in 2009 launching the first ecofriendly biodegradable tea sacks. In 2010, the company announced in its sustainability report launching a "Sustainable Living Plan" aiming to reduce waste, greenhouse emissions and "setting worldwide goals for improving the health and well-being of consumers, reducing its negative environmental impact" (HBR, 2017). During that same year, it set a target that by 2020 100% of its products will use sustainable packaging.

From a CSR perspective, this shows all three relevant CSR communication strategies for sustainability. By reporting its continuous commitments over the years for the environment, it is safe to assume that Unilever achieved the CSR communication strategy of environmental stewardship. Furthermore, the company announced the development of biodegradable tea sacks, we can say that Unilever did invest in research and development and used it as a CSR communication strategy.



Finally, since the company announced in 2010 that it will change 100% of its products into sustainable packaging by 2020, it means that it is working on having a global impact. This concludes that Unilever indeed uses the CSR communication strategy of global success as well (See table 7).

### The discursive legitimization strategies

To find the discursive legitimization strategies, we look at the press releases and tweets. The company announced in a press release in July 2nd 2010 that it will reduce waste, placing a target to make its packaging 100% sustainable by 2020:

*“The policy outlines the company’s ambitious goal to work with its suppliers to source 75 per cent of its paper and board packaging from sustainably managed forests or from recycled material by 2015, rising to 100 per cent by 2020”* (Unilever, 2010 July 2)

One can see in this announcement that the company is committed to environmental protection, showing long-term commitment toward reducing the harm of packaging. This event is supplemented in 2014, when the company announces a 15% reduction of plastic use in packaging material. Later on, in January 30th 2015 by celebrated in a press release reaching the milestone that it has previously promised set to be achieved 5 years earlier on waste reduction. Furthermore, in June 11th 2015 Unilever announces a joint effort with Mars, GSK and Sainsbury's to create a movement for change on zero waste. This shows the formation of an alliance to reduce plastic waste.

One can see multiple discursive legitimization strategies being used during this period. First, Unilever spoke of setting long-term targets to be achieved over a period of time. This is an example of using the discursive legitimization strategy of promising reforms as it promised 100% use of recycled materials by 2020 (Seidl et al., 2012). Furthermore, the company reported reducing plastic by 15% as well as reporting successful completion of former milestones, these are clear examples of using the discursive legitimization strategy of improvement (Luyckx & Janssens, 2016; Sillince & Brown, 2009). Finally, Unilever announced that it formed an alliance with other companies to combat plastic waste. Alliances can help companies legitimize as a socially responsible firm by sharing the efforts to develop new sustainable technologies that achieve social legitimacy (Kishna et al., 2017).

In conclusion, Unilever used three discursive legitimization strategies during the first period. Reporting firm sustainable practices on plastic and improvement (Luyckx & Janssens, 2016; Sillince & Brown, 2009), Promising reform and setting long-term targets before (Seidl, Sanderson & Robert,

2012), and entering into sustainable alliances to develop new solutions to plastic waste. This shows early compliance with environmental concerns on plastic (Oliver & Holzinger, 2008) (See table 7).

## Public perception

To identify public perception toward Unilever, we look at Greenpeace and *The Guardian* articles. Greenpeace had no article published for Unilever related to plastic waste. *The Guardian*, on the other hand, published one article In January 9th 2013. *The Guardian* newspaper announced the victory of UK marine conservation groups over Unilever, and published an article praising Unilever for its decision of phasing out plastic microbeads from its products by 2015. This shows acquiescence to public pressure, this behaviour benefits the company. Also, it promises to achieve the goal of removing these items by a specified date. The article had 134 shares on Facebook. Unilever said in the article:

*"We can confirm that we are phasing out the use of microbeads in all of our personal care products. The issue of plastics particles in the ocean is an important issue and we have reviewed the use of microbeads in our portfolio (both current products and those in the pipeline). We have decided to phase out the use of plastic micro beads as a 'scrub' material in all of our personal care products. We expect to complete this phase-out globally by 2015."* (Smithers, 2013 January 09)

We can see in the article's content that *The Guardian* supported Unilever's commitments of its environmental activities. In the end, Unilever benefited from this as legitimation. Table (7) below summarizes the analysis of Unilever's CSR communication strategies and discursive legitimation strategies, and public perception during the period before the UNSDG.

	CSR communication strategies (Kim & Rader, 2010)	Discursive legitimation strategies
Unilever's strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Innovations in Research and development</li> <li>-Environmental stewardship</li> <li>-Global success</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Improvement (Luyckx &amp; Janssens, 2016; Sillince &amp; Brown, 2009)</li> <li>-Promising reform (Seidl et al., 2012)</li> <li>-Alliances (Kishna et al., 2016)</li> </ul>
<i>The Guardian's</i> legitimation strategies	Reporting active environmental responsiveness and positive progress.	
Greenpeace's discursive legitimation strategies	-	

Table 7. Unilever's CSR communication strategies, discursive legitimation strategies, and public perception before UNSDG

#### 4.1.4 Summary of the first period (Before the UNSDG)

After analyzing the data, we can identify the organizational legitimacy in sustainability and CSR communication strategies of these companies. The first period shows that the legitimacy in sustainability is shaped by stakeholder perception which reacts to a company's discursive legitimation that is based on its CSR communication strategies (Figure 2, p.18). However, during the first period, it is important to recognize the low saliency of the issue of plastic waste (Figure 3, p.31). That is evident through the relatively small number of *The Guardian* articles published on each company, as well as the absence of any Greenpeace articles. Yet still each company has been analyzed, and since there are some differences in the strategies of each a comparison can be made.

To compare the legitimacy of each company's sustainability, we must look at how each company has been judged by the public's perception (approval or disapproval). One clear observation was that Nestle has received more disapproval from the public as opposed to Danone and Unilever during the first period. After analyzing each company's discursive legitimation strategies during the first period, we can see that Nestle was less active in comparison to Unilever and Danone. This strategy was the promise of reforms (Seidl et al., 2012). Yet all companies including Nestle showed the discursive legitimation strategy of reporting improvement. Promising reform seemed particularly relevant before the UNSDG showing intentions to comply with the public (Luyckx & Janssens, 2016; Sillince & Brown, 2009; Oliver, 1991). It is possible that this seemed more important for public perception than seemingly expected strategy of improvement. However, this is not a quantitative study, and the exact impact of each individual strategy cannot be measured and compared against each other. Yet one can observe and identify the discourse and communication of each company in the context of sustainability.

To make sure that this assumption is accurate, we can also compare the base of the discursive legitimation strategies which are the CSR communication strategies. In comparing the CSR communication strategies of the three companies, one can see that all three companies implemented the strategies of research and development and environmental stewardship. Yet Unilever and Danone also used the global success CSR communication strategy unlike Nestle which did not. This could explain a lack of long-term commitment that does not show Nestlé's keen interest in executing worldwide sustainable action. This in turn explains the absence of the discursive legitimation strategy of promising reform since by definition it shows a degree of long-term environmental commitment. Consequently, if a company implements the CSR communication strategy of global success, it will lead to the discursive legitimation strategy of promising reform and long-term environmental commitments by default.

In conclusion, we can see that during the first period, it is relevant to use the discursive legitimation strategy of reporting improvement. However, promising reform was used by the more legitimate Danone and Unilever.

Accompanying this strategy, it is important that a company adopts the CSR communication strategy of global success to allow a credible display and application of the discursive legitimization strategy of promising reform. This combination of strategies might help to create a positive public perception for a company on its legitimacy in sustainability. But, it is worth considering that this is true in a period of relatively low saliency on the subject of plastic waste (Figure 3, p.31). Table (8) shows each of the company's discursive legitimization strategies and their CSR communication strategies. In addition, it shows the legitimization (delegitimation) strategies used by Greenpeace and *The Guardian* before the UNSDG.

	CSR communication strategies (Kim & Rader, 2010)	Discursive legitimization strategies
Nestlé's strategies	-Innovations in Research and development. -Environmental stewardship.	-
Danone's strategies	-Innovations in Research and development. -Environmental stewardship. -Global success.	-Improvement (Luyckx & Janssens, 2016; Sillince & Brown, 2009) -Promising reform (Seidl et al., 2012)
Unilever's strategies	-Innovations in Research and development. -Environmental stewardship. -Global success.	-Improvement (Luyckx & Janssens, 2016; Sillince & Brown, 2009) -Promising reform (Seidl et al., 2012) -Alliances (Kishna et al., 2016)
<i>The Guardian's</i> contribution to the firm's public perception	-Nestle: Moralization, The articles reported Nestlé's lack of environmental responsiveness, product harmfulness and questioning the firm's environmental activities.  -Danone: Reporting active environmental responsiveness, the benefits that companies can obtain from sustainability.  -Unilever: Reporting active environmental responsiveness and positive progress.	
Greenpeace's contribution to the firm's public perception	-	

Table 8. Unilever, Nestlé and Danone's CSR communication strategies, discursive legitimization strategies, and public perception before UNSDG

## 4.2 After the UNSDG

In this subsection, we shall observe some differences in company CSR communication strategies and discursive legitimization strategies after the UNSDG. As a result, one can see changes in public perception. In Figure (3) (page 31), online activity on plastic waste steadily increased. Plastic waste became a topic of global interest for the public. At this point, all companies began to have a more explicit plastic sustainability agenda. Due to the increase in Greenpeace tweets on the subject

through Figure (3) (page 31) the issue is more salient in the second period. After the UNSDG the topic of plastic waste has been established as a major problem to be addressed worldwide.

In this subsection, I explore the second period's CSR communication strategies and legitimization strategies dominated the context of plastic waste. In addition, I observed and analyze *The Guardian* and Greenpeace as a representation of stakeholder perception that defined each company's legitimacy.

#### 4.2.1 Nestlé

##### The CSR communication strategies

After the announcement of the UNSDG, Nestle was encouraged to take a more proactive approach on the matter of plastic waste. Starting with its CSR communication strategies, there was a new company behaviour looking at Nestlé's sustainability reports after the UNSDG. In the sustainability report of 2016, Nestlé encouraged its consumers through pictures and texts on product labels to recycle them as part of an effort to raise awareness on the issue of plastic waste. And in the sustainability report of 2017, Nestlé announced the launch of commercial-scale production of 60% bio-based pet plastic bottles by 2020. That same year, it also reported celebrating reaching an objective of making 39% of its bottles made out of recyclable plastic.

The CSR communication strategies have become more explicit during this period. Nestle continued using the CSR communication strategies of the first period which are environmental stewardship; Active reporting of efforts and involvement in sustainability. And the CSR communication strategy of investing in research and development; by launching bio-based plastic bottles", as well as achieving a 39% of its bottles made out of recyclable plastic. However, it did include this time the CSR communication strategy of global success, scale increased as it launched products that are 60% bio-based on a "commercial-scale". Relative to the first period, Nestle increased the number of CSR communication strategies employed, by adding the CSR communication strategy of global success to its set of already existing CSR communication.

##### The discursive legitimization strategies

To analyse discursive legitimization strategies after the UNSDG, I look at Nestlé's press releases and tweets. In May 2017, Nestlé announced in a press release, a partnership with Danone to develop a 100% sustainable bottle striving to a zero environmental impact by 2030. The press release mentioned:

*“Nestlé Waters is partnering with Danone and Origin Materials, a US startup based in California, to develop a PET plastic bottle made from 100% sustainable and renewable resources.”* (Nestle, 2017 Mar 2)

The motive to entering an alliance with a more legitimate partner contributes to a company's legitimacy and benefit. Nestlé also announced in 2017 a statement where it shows a reduction in waste in packaging:

*“By the end of 2017, we had eliminated more than 100,000 tonnes of packaging materials from our production processes. That's equivalent to 10 Eiffel Towers.”* (Nestle, 2017)

This shows more activity in sustainable behaviour. Later on April 10th of 2018, Nestlé published in a press release (and also tweeted) setting a new goal for the sustainable use of plastic, by saying “Nestlé aiming at 100% recyclable or reusable packaging by 2025”. The statement included:

*“Preventing packaging material ending up as waste, including in seas, oceans and waterways is one of the key reasons behind Nestlé's pledge.”* (Nestle, 2018 April 10)

Pledges are a sign of long-term commitments. The company followed the same discursive legitimization strategies on Twitter. Its posts announced an increased tone of commitment to plastic waste using a more personal language, recognizing plastic waste as a global concern, tweeting:

*“Plastic waste is one the biggest #sustainability challenges the world faces. Nestlé's new #packaging ambition helps tackle it”* (Nestle, 2018 April 10)

To summarize, Nestlé has increased its environmental and sustainable behaviour greatly during the second period. The discursive legitimization strategies used were used more frequently and in more variety. We can be sure that Nestle kept using the improvement strategy which was also used during the first period, such as announcing the launches of on new sustainable materials or initiatives (Luyckx & Janssens, 2016; Sillince & Brown, 2009). However, this time, Nestle included the discursive legitimization strategy of promising reform (Seidl et al., 2012). This was evident in setting long-term targets such as making 100% recyclable/reusable packaging by 2025. Furthermore, Nestle also included the discursive legitimization strategy of announcing an alliance with Danone to develop new sustainable plastic materials (Kishna et al., 2016). One can conclude that Nestle changed its discursive legitimization strategies from only using reporting improvement, to add the strategies of promising reform and alliances in sustainable activities.

## Public perception

To analyse public perception for the second period (after the UNSDG), I analyse *The Guardian* newspaper and Greenpeace articles. In June 9th 2016, *The Guardian* criticized Nestlé by publishing an article with the title: “Nestlé, if you care about the environment what's with your disposable coffee cups?” (Sauven, 2017 July). The article’s content criticizes the company and one can interpret this as delegitimation (Moralization). This proves the increased saliency in the plastic waste problem. The topic of plastic waste escalated further in December 6th 2016 when *The Guardian*, for a second time, criticized Nestlé for not providing information regarding the recycling rate of Nespresso. This article went viral, shared over 53,000 times on Facebook. A spokesperson for Nestlé said:

*“Given multiple recycling options, any estimate of consumer recycling rates would be inaccurate, so we focus on recycling capacity as a concrete measurement of our progress ... Recycling is a shared responsibility and consumers’ participation is essential.”* (Hanson, 2016 December 06).

Nestlé’s response shared part of the environmental responsibility on consumer behaviour. Later in March 15th 2017, *The Guardian* published an article about plastic waste raising awareness on the matter. The title was “Millions of single-use plastic soft drink bottles sold every year, report shows”. The article cites Greenpeace when it surveyed Nestlé as well as Coca-Cola, PepsiCo, Suntory, Danone and Dr. Pepper. The tone used in this article was of distress, with over 1700 shares on Facebook:

*“Millions of tonnes of plastics are ending up in the ocean every year, harming marine wildlife, taking centuries to break down and spreading toxic chemicals.”* (Press Association, 2017 March 15)

These efforts are to establish the product harmfulness of the mentioned firms. Using the same tone, another article followed the Trump election, In August 20th 2017. A lawyer from the ministry of interior represented Nestlé for bottling rights in Colorado national park. This causes plastic pollution as well as water supply depletion by water bottling plants. Nestlé denied knowing that representative, and consequently public sentiment toward Nestlé was negative. The topic went viral, and the article was shared on Facebook around 16,000 times.

In March 2nd 2018, *The Guardian* published another article talking about eco-friendly technology. It supported Nestlé for its recent research and development of new biodegradable materials for plastic bottles. Two weeks later, *The Guardian* published another article with a review of the World Health Organization found that Nestlé’s plastic bottles contain microplastics. This article got the highest number of shares on Facebook counting over 73000.

Greenpeace also participated in the publishing content condemning Nestlé's sustainability agenda. In September 22nd 2017, Greenpeace announced Nestlé among the worst offenders in plastic waste. Abigail Aguilar, a Campaigner for Greenpeace Philippines, stated:

*"When we throw something away, there is no 'away'. The Philippines is the third biggest source of plastic ocean pollution because global corporations are locking us into cheap, disposable plastics, rather than innovating and finding solutions"* (Greenpeace International, 2017 September 22)

As the article highlighted the company's harmful behaviour, Nestlé responded comprehensibly by saying (Schuman, 1995):

*"Nestlé would like to thank Greenpeace for meeting with us on 22 September 2017, when we presented our environmental initiatives on solid waste management. We will continue listening and talking to Greenpeace, as we further improve the sustainability of our packaging"* (Greenpeace International, 2017 September 22)

As one can see, not all *The Guardian* and Greenpeace articles were criticizing Nestlé. On one hand, *The Guardian* newspaper validated the company's efforts to develop new materials for eco-friendly plastic bottle production, yet most articles condemned the company as the content questioned Nestlé for the harm of some of its current plastic products. On the other hand, Greenpeace did criticize the company for its environmentally harmful behaviour. However, during the second period, Nestlé showed a higher degree of commitment toward the environment than earlier, as well as a more compliant environmental attitude toward the issue of plastic waste (Oliver, 1991). Overall, the company did receive a delegitimation from the public for its activities.

The following image shows the number of times that Nestlé mentioned the topic of plastic waste and packaging in red, and the number of times that the topic of sustainability was mentioned on twitter by Nestlé in blue (Figure 4). In the next figure, we can see the number of times a "*The Guardian*" article was published mentioning Nestlé's plastic waste topic. Also, the number of times it was shared on Facebook, the brown numbers shows the articles published that year (Figure 5). Below it, table (9) summarizes Nestlé's CSR communication strategies, discursive legitimation strategies and stakeholder perception after the UNSDG:



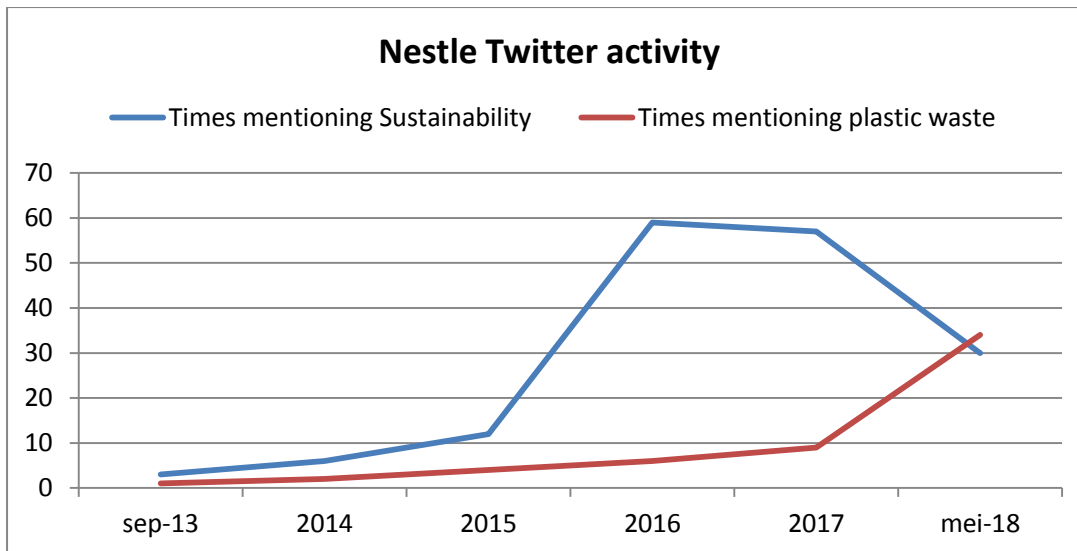


Figure 4. Nestlé's twitter activity from September 25th 2013 till May 12th 2018.

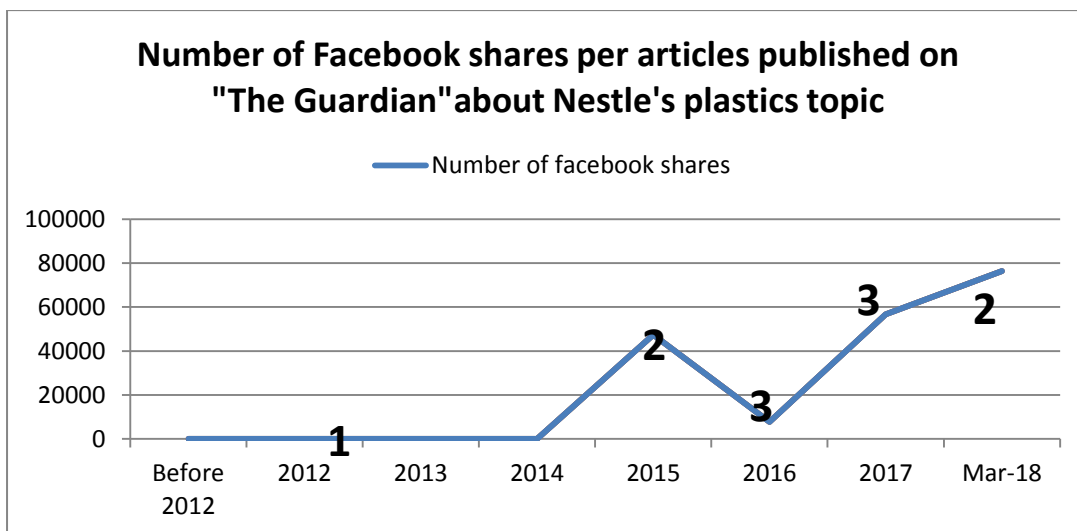


Figure 5. Number of Facebook shares per articles published on "The Guardian" about Nestlé's plastics topic from 1999 till May 12th 2018.

	CSR communication strategies (Kim & Rader, 2010)	Discursive legitimization strategies
Nestlé's strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Innovations in Research and development.</li> <li>-Environmental stewardship.</li> <li>-Global success.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Improvement (Luyckx &amp; Janssens, 2016; Sillince &amp; Brown, 2009)</li> <li>-Promising reform (Seidl et al., 2012)</li> <li>-Alliances (Kishna et al., 2017)</li> </ul>
<i>The Guardian's</i> contribution to the firm's public perception	-Moralization: The newspaper reported the company's active environmental responsiveness, but also the harmful environmental impact that some of its products have.	
Greenpeace's contribution to the firm's public perception	Greenpeace reported some of Nestlé's active environmental responsiveness. But it also criticized it for its insufficient on its harmful products "if you care about the environment what's with your disposable coffee cups?" (Sauven, 2017 July)	

Table 9. Summary of Nestlé's CSR communication strategies, discursive legitimization strategies and stakeholder perception after the UNSDG.

#### 4.2.2 Danone

##### The CSR communication strategies

During the second period, Danone's activities remained approximately unchanged. Its stance remained the same in its CSR communication strategies. To see this I observed its sustainability reports after the UNSDG. Danone's 2016 sustainability report, regarding plastic waste, announced that it will have "zero plastics landfills" for post-industrial packaging waste by 2020 in countries with developed collection systems, and by 2025 in all of Danone's factories. And in 2017's sustainability report, the target remained the same with focus on circular economies on plastic waste among other resources. Also in 2017, Danone announced an alliance with Nestle to develop new solutions for plastic waste.

As the emphasis of the reports on circular economics, announcing the reduction of waste in land-fills and announcing sustainable alliances is evidence of communicating Danone's environmental care, shown as the CSR communication strategy of environmental stewardship. Furthermore, since Danone announced in 2016's report that it's committed to create "zero plastic landfills" it satisfies the CSR communication strategy of global success. Furthermore, in line with the first period, Danone reported investing in research and development of bio-based materials through a partnership with Nestle. This allows for the assumption of using the CSR communication strategy of research and development.

##### The discursive legitimization strategies

As for the company's discursive legitimization strategies, we look at its press releases and tweets. The company announced in a press release a new vision. On November 16th 2015, Danone "commits to an ambitious new climate policy, targeting zero net carbon emissions within its direct and shared scope of responsibility". (Nutiticia Research Center, 2015). And on December 4th 2015, Danone announced, in a press release, an alliance with Veolia to meet the global challenge of climate change. Emmanuel Faber, Danone's CEO, said:

*"With this alliance, Danone continues to innovate in the social and environmental spheres by encouraging the emergence of entirely new forms of cooperation that promote change. By teaming up with Veolia, we are ensuring a secure source of strategic resources and optimizing their utilization, since our climate policy is an integral part of our mission and our business."* (Danone, 2015 December 04).

As for the company's twitter activity, the company's twitter activity was limited. In March 2nd 2017, it announced on twitter its alliance with Nestlé on creating 100% bio-plastic bottles. After that, the remaining tweets in 2018 promoted one of its brands "Evian" about its transition to 100% recycled plastic bottles.

As a result, Danone kept the discursive legitimization strategies that it had during the first period. These are reporting improvement discursive legitimization strategy; such as announcing its activities of aiming for zero net carbon emissions and working on creating 100% bio-plastic bottles (Luyckx & Janssens, 2016; Sillince & Brown, 2009). And the promising reforms discursive legitimization strategy; pledging by announcing long-term objectives in setting zero plastic landfills by 2020. In addition to these two strategies, Danone included alliances in sustainable activities as a new discursive legitimization strategy during the second period; this happened in partnering with Nestle to develop 100% bio-plastic bottles (Kishna et al., 2017). Therefore, Danone used three discursive legitimization strategies during the second period as opposed to two strategies during the first period.

## Public perception

To determine the company's stakeholder perception, in November 21<sup>st</sup> 2017, *The Guardian* published an article about Danone's project in ocean floor bottled water. It claimed that it is sustainable and eco-friendly. Danone also promised to bottle it using eco-friendly packaging. The article was shared 332 times on Facebook. However, plastic started to become a more frequent topic, In April 27<sup>th</sup> 2016, *The Guardian* published an article that shows Danone's interest in raising awareness on plastic waste. The article had 144 Facebook shares:

*"The challenge for global dairy companies, such as Arla or Danone, is not just to focus on the issues that will help them sell products to consumers, but to understand all the sustainability issues around dairy. Just because consumers in one region don't care about plastic waste, doesn't mean it isn't a key issue."* (Haahr, 2016 April 27).

The article did not condemn Danone as much as it was raising awareness on the importance of consumer behaviour and the challenge that companies face to manage their sustainable agenda based on public awareness. One year later, on January 18<sup>th</sup> 2018, "Evian" was again mentioned to announcing it would become 100% circular by 2025 by producing 100% of its bottles out of recycled plastic (Vidalon, D., 2018). Additionally, in alignment with the UNSDG, Danone also announced that it aims to be carbon neutral by 2050.

As for Greenpeace, In March 14<sup>th</sup> 2017, Greenpeace UK has conducted a survey of the plastic footprints and policies of the top six global soft drinks brands: Coca-Cola, PepsiCo, Suntory, Danone, Dr. Pepper Snapple and Nestlé. And despite plastic bottles forming a major source of ocean plastic pollution, the survey results revealed a lack of action by the soft drinks industry to prevent their plastic bottles ending up in our oceans (Greenpeace UK, 2017).

The company received little scrutiny with on its activities, and no criticism on its sustainability efforts with plastic waste. Yet at the same time it also has reduced its online activity regarding plastic waste relative to the first period. But it is safe to claim that there was a mixed public perception in both supporting and condemning Danone’s activities. However, the general ambient had low virality as will be shown below in figure (7).

The following image shows the number of times that Danone mentioned the topic of plastic waste and packaging in blue, and the number of times that the topic of sustainability was mentioned on twitter by Danone in red (Figure 6). In the next figure, we can see the number of times a “*The Guardian*” article was published mentioning Danone’s plastic waste topic. Also, the number of times it was shared on Facebook, the brown numbers shows the articles published that year (Figure 7). Below it, table (9) summarizes Danone’s CSR communication strategies, discursive legitimization strategies and stakeholder perception after the UNSDG:

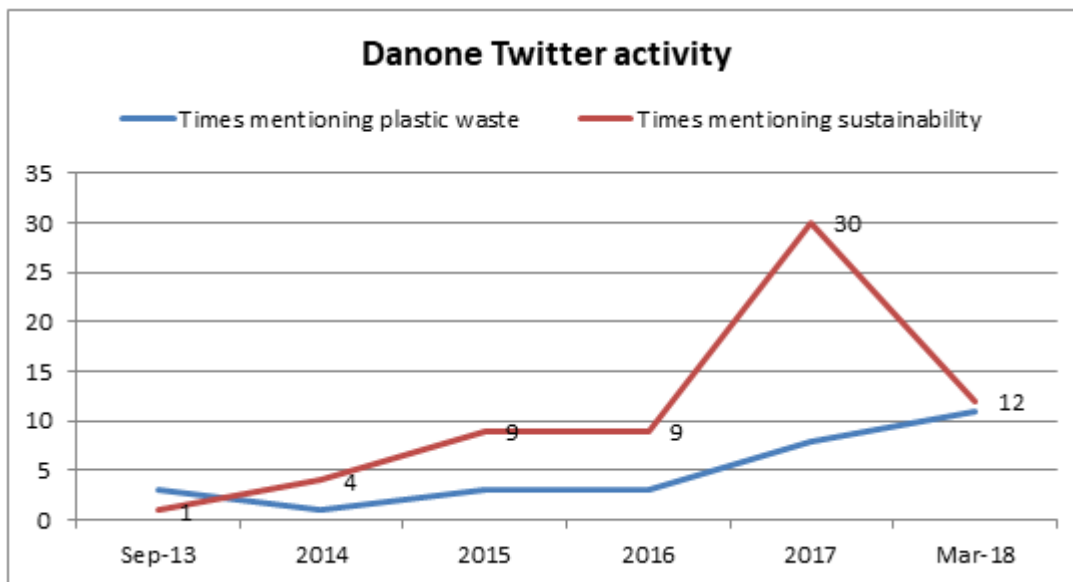


Figure 6. Danone’s twitter activity from September 25th 2013 till May 12th 2018.

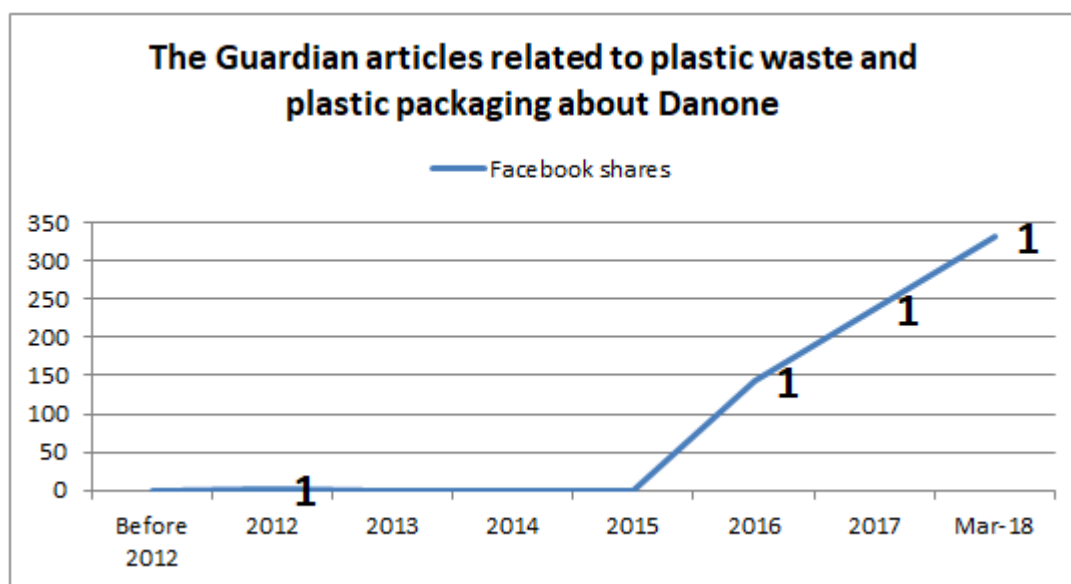


Figure 7. Number of Facebook shares per articles published on "The Guardian" about Danone's plastics topic from 1999 till May 12th 2018.

	CSR communication strategies (Kim & Rader, 2010)	Discursive legitimization strategies
Danone's strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Innovations in Research and development.</li> <li>-Environmental stewardship.</li> <li>-Global success.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Reporting improvement (Luyckx &amp; Janssens, 2016; Sillince &amp; Brown, 2009)</li> <li>-Promising reform (Seidl et al., 2012)</li> <li>-Alliances (Kishna et al., 2017)</li> </ul>
<i>The Guardian's</i> contribution to the firm's public perception	The newspaper reported the company's active environmental responsiveness.	
Greenpeace's contribution to the firm's public perception	Green peace reported the company's environmental harm caused by its plastic bottles.	

Table 10. Summary of Danone's CSR communication strategies, discursive legitimization strategies and stakeholder perception after the UNSDG.

### 4.2.3 Unilever

#### The CSR communication strategies

Unilever did have some changes in its behaviour since the UNSDG. Normally, I begin the analysis by looking at its CSR communication strategies through at its sustainability reports. Unfortunately, the company had no sustainability reports online for 2015 and afterwards, as a substitute, I used the company's annual reports of 2016 and 2017 since they contained information on the company's sustainability agenda. In these reports, the company states its long-term plans of making all its plastics recyclable and reusable by 2025. In 2016, the company promoted its efforts to create

efficient packaging designs to conserve both plastic resources and production energy. In 2017 the company stated in its annual report:

*“We are more than half way towards meeting our 2020 commitment to reduce waste associated with the disposal of our products. This has reduced by about 29% since 2010 due to increases in consumer recycling and changes in our portfolio.”* (Unilever, 2017)

This report shows the company’s sustainability achievements in plastic waste reduction as it reaches its 2010 goal.

The result of Unilever’s attitude after the UNSDG shows a continuity of its CSR communication strategies of the first period. One can see the company’s CSR communication strategy of environmental stewardship in reporting multiple initiatives to meet sustainability challenges such as waste reduction and recycling. Furthermore, we see the company’s CSR communication strategy of global success by stating to be halfway through its objectives of 2010 of reducing all of the company’s plastic products waste to 100% sustainable packaging by 2020. Finally, we see the company’s CSR communication strategy of investing in research and development in its 2016 annual report, by announcing its efforts in producing efficient designs that conserve both plastic resources and production energy. Thus one can conclude that the company used the same CSR communication strategies on both periods (Kim & Rader, 2010).

### The discursive legitimization strategies

To identify Unilever’s discursive legitimization strategies, we look at its press releases and tweets. In February 2<sup>nd</sup> 2016, Unilever announces in a press release a milestone of a “zero waste” reduction campaign three times as that of the previous year. In January 14<sup>th</sup> 2017, Unilever again sets a new milestone in a press release, saying:

*“Unilever today committed to ensuring that all of its plastic packaging is fully reusable, recyclable or compostable by 2025”* (Unilever, 2017 January 14)

Here, Unilever expresses its commitment toward sustainable packaging as a long-term solution to be achieved by 2025. In May 11<sup>th</sup> 2017, Unilever published a press release with the title “Unilever develops new technology to tackle the global issue of plastic sachet waste”. The technology should enable the recycling of plastic waste for developing countries, but research for recycling plastic sachet waste continues:

*"With this innovative pilot plant we can, for the first time ever, recycle high-value polymers from dirty, post-consumer, multi-layer sachets."* (Unilever, 2017 May 11).

This example shows the discursive legitimization strategy of reporting improvement. In January 23rd 2018, Unilever publishes a press release calling to "Accelerate" industry action on plastic packaging waste. Among the actions that the company demanded was for companies to:

*"commit to 100% reusable, recyclable or compostable packaging by 2025 and set stretching targets for using post-consumer recycled content."* (Unilever, 2018 January 23).

This statement showed a call for action to more efforts toward addressing plastic waste. As for twitter, the company tweeted part of its press release announcements, and posts on highlighting its commitment toward plastic waste as a global issue. In April 2018, the company announces a partnership to tackle plastic waste:

*"Of the millions of tonnes of PET plastic produced worldwide every year, just a small fraction is recycled. That could be about to change thanks to our new partnership with @IoniqaCircular @IVLTeam"* (Unilever, 2018 April 9)

In conclusion, the discursive legitimization strategies used by Unilever in the second period were the same to the first period. Such as the discursive legitimization strategy of alliances, this is a clear effort in sustainability to tackle plastic waste issues with Ioniqa-Circular (Seidl et al., 2012). Furthermore, we see the discursive legitimization strategy of reporting improvement in announcing new products that containing eco-friendly sachets (Luyckx & Janssens, 2016; Sillince & Brown, 2009). Finally, we also see the discursive legitimization strategy of promising reform by setting targets of 100% recyclable packaging by 2025 (Kishna et al., 2016).

## Public perception

Moving on to stakeholder perspective, we look at *The Guardian* and Greenpeace articles in the second period. In December 8<sup>th</sup> 2016, *The Guardian* published an article blaming Unilever and other companies for failing to recycle their products in the UK and European countries. The problem being that consumers were not guided properly to recycling due to product design faults. The article was shared on Facebook 97 times:

*"The company says it will ensure all recyclable packaging is "clearly labelled as such" when packaging designs are updated."* (Balch, 2016 December 08)

The company responded comprehensively acknowledging the issue as *The Guardian* criticized Unilever. On February 2<sup>nd</sup> 2017, *The Guardian* publishes an article with the title “M&S and Unilever promise plastic redesign to cut waste”. In the article, the company was criticized for the Unilever’s 15% reduced plastic in its bottles as ineffective. Yet Unilever promised to improve plastic design with the collaboration of a partner. The article was shared on Facebook 1111 times:

“... *The Ellen MacArthur Foundation, of which Unilever is a partner, seeks to create a coalition of industry players to rethink the future of plastics.*” (Boztas, 2017 February 02).

The article demonstrated Unilever’s initiative for future efforts on plastic. A year later in February 28<sup>th</sup> 2018, *The Guardian* publishes an article about “PG tips” (a Unilever brand) announces that it will switch to biodegradable teabags. The article was popular as it mentioned Unilever’s step to join that innovation. The article was shared on Facebook 30667 times:

“*In the first major move by a mainstream tea brand, the Unilever-owned company says it is working to make all its teabags from 100% plant-based material by the end of the year.*” (Smithers, 2018 February 28).

As we continue analyzing public perception, we look at Greenpeace articles. In September 17<sup>th</sup> 2017, Unilever was classified as 2<sup>nd</sup> worst offender in mismanaged plastic waste. In addition, on October 5<sup>th</sup> 2017, in the “Our Ocean 2017” conference, Unilever was listed among the big companies that produce single-use plastic waste. The objective of the conference was to “[it] brings together representatives of governments, civil society, science, finance and businesses from around the world to discuss ocean protection. This year they are discussing marine litter.” (Greenpeace UK, 2017). Unlike the first period (Before the UNSDG), Greenpeace was active toward Unilever regarding plastic pollution in criticizing the company for its environmental damage.

As a result, we see that Unilever was criticized by both *The Guardian* newspaper and Greenpeace for its failure to comply with recycling expectations. Relative to the first period, Unilever received more negative public comments during the second period. The scrutiny focused on blaming Unilever for insufficient improvements or harming the environment; such as *The Guardian*’s article complaining about 15% less plastic used in the bottles (which signifies efficiency more than ecological concern). Furthermore Greenpeace accused the company for being among the worst offenders in plastic waste.

The following image shows the number of times that Unilever mentioned the topic of plastic waste and packaging in blue, and the number of times that the topic of sustainability was mentioned on



twitter by Unilever in red (Figure 8). In the next figure, we can see the number of times a “*The Guardian*” article was published mentioning Unilever’s plastic waste topic. Also, the number of times it was shared on Facebook, the brown numbers shows the articles published that year (Figure 9). Below it, table (11) summarizes Unilever’s CSR communication strategies, discursive legitimization strategies and stakeholder perception after the UNSDG:

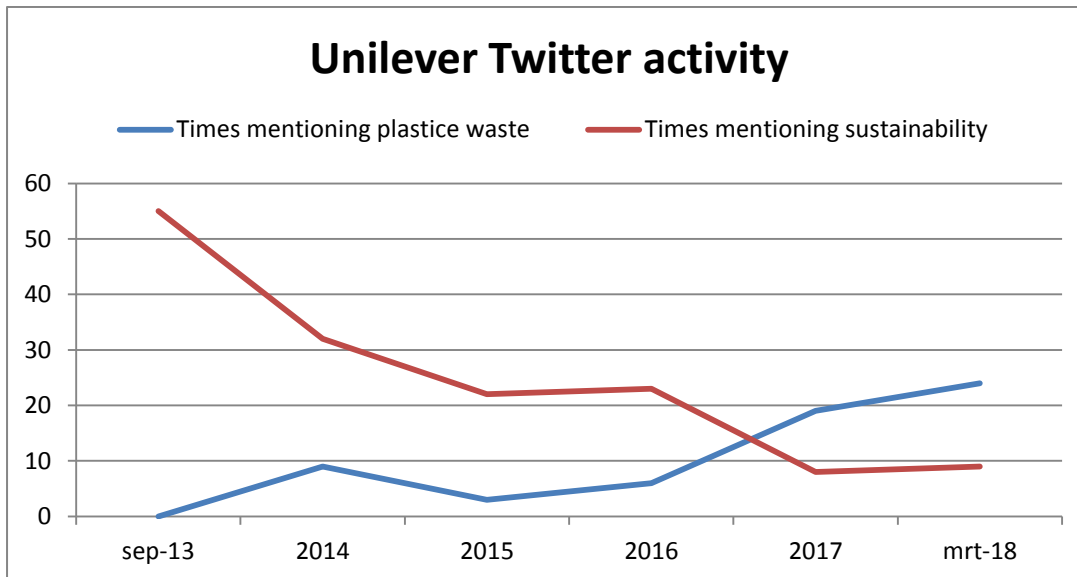


Figure 8. Unilever’s twitter activity from September 25th 2013 till May 12th 2018.

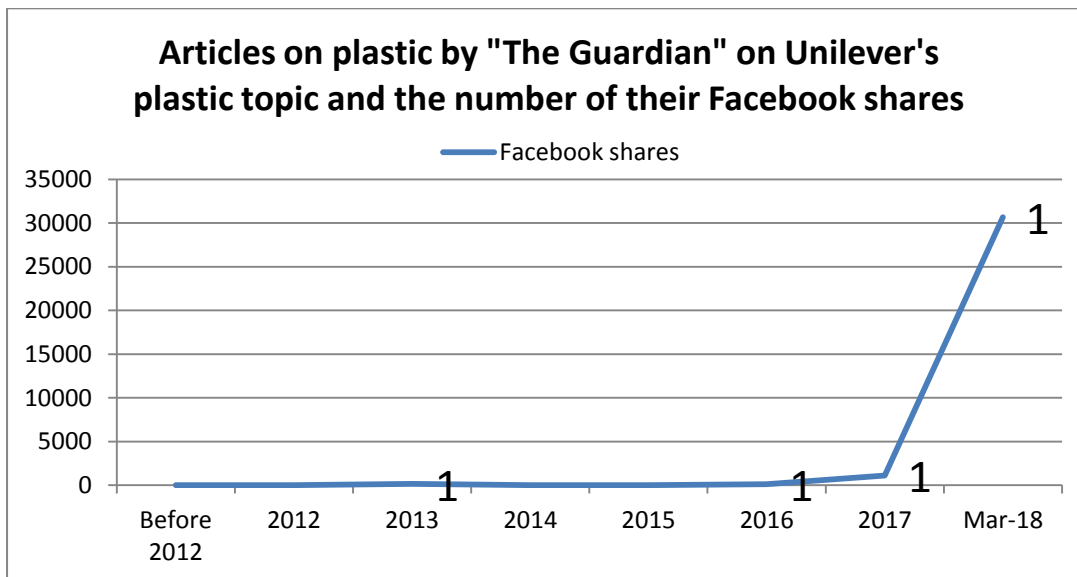


Figure 9. Number of Facebook shares per articles published on “*The Guardian*” about Unilever’s plastics topic from 1999 till May 12th 2018.

	CSR communication strategies (Kim & Rader, 2010)	Discursive legitimation strategies
Unilever's strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Innovations in Research and development.</li> <li>-Environmental stewardship.</li> <li>-Global success.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Improvement (Luyckx &amp; Janssens, 2016; Sillince &amp; Brown, 2009)</li> <li>-Promising reform (Seidl et al., 2012)</li> <li>-Alliances (Kishna et al., 2016)</li> </ul>
<i>The Guardian's</i> contribution to the firm's public perception	The newspaper reported the company's active environmental responsiveness. It also reported scrutiny for insufficient results.	
Greenpeace's contribution to the firm's public perception	Greenpeace called Unilever as the second worst offender in marine plastic garbage. This is a way of reporting the environmental harm of Unilever's products.	

Table 11. Summary of Unilever's CSR communication strategies, discursive legitimation strategies and stakeholder perception after the UNSDG.

#### 4.2.4 Summary of the Second period (After the UNSDG)

To compare the legitimacy of each company's sustainability, we must look at how each company has been judged by the public's perception (approval or disapproval). However, there have been some in the CSR communication strategies and discursive legitimation strategies employed by some constituents in the second period. One thing is certain, public perception was more frequent during the second period. That shows an increased saliency in the issue of plastic waste. There is more content on the subject in an increased number of articles published on the subject by both Greenpeace and *The Guardian* newspaper, and there is more virality to that content (See figure 11). The articles reflected more critical content about each company if its activities were perceived as ecologically deviant.

It is worth mentioning that the appearance of Greenpeace articles during the second period proves the increased saliency of plastic waste as an issue. We can also see during the second period the increased importance of plastic waste through an increased frequency of mentioning "plastic" on Greenpeace tweets (See figure 3, p.31). And it criticized all three companies on the matter, but it did so with different intensities and frequencies for each company.

In conclusion, we can see a different impact in the strategies during the second period. In addition, the companies successfully implemented the mentioned three discursive legitimation strategies and the three the CSR communication strategies. Yet, they did not sufficiently achieve positive public perception as in the first period. Later I provide a detailed argument on the results in comparing both periods. Table (12) shows each

of the company's discursive legitimation strategies and their CSR communication strategies. In addition, it shows the legitimizing (delegitimizing) content used by Greenpeace and *The Guardian* after the UNSDG.

	CSR communication strategies (Kim & Rader, 2010)	Discursive legitimation strategies
Nestlé's strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Innovations in Research and development.</li> <li>-Environmental stewardship.</li> <li>-Global success.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Improvement (Luyckx &amp; Janssens, 2016; Sillince &amp; Brown, 2009)</li> <li>-Promising reform (Seidl et al., 2012)</li> <li>-Alliances (Kishna et al., 2017)</li> </ul>
Danone's strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Innovations in Research and development.</li> <li>-Environmental stewardship.</li> <li>-Global success.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Reporting improvement (Luyckx &amp; Janssens, 2016; Sillince &amp; Brown, 2009)</li> <li>-Promising reform (Seidl et al., 2012)</li> <li>-Alliances (Kishna et al., 2017)</li> </ul>
Unilever's strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Innovations in Research and development.</li> <li>-Environmental stewardship.</li> <li>-Global success.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Improvement (Luyckx &amp; Janssens, 2016; Sillince &amp; Brown, 2009)</li> <li>-Promising reform (Seidl et al., 2012)</li> <li>-Alliances (Kishna et al., 2016)</li> </ul>
<i>The Guardian's</i> contribution to the firm's public perception	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Nestle: The newspaper reported the company's active environmental responsiveness as well as the harmful environmental impact some of its products.</li> <li>-Danone: The newspaper reported the company's active environmental responsiveness.</li> <li>-Unilever: The newspaper reported the company's active environmental responsiveness. It also reported occasional scrutiny for lacking significant results.</li> </ul>	
Greenpeace's contribution to the firm's public perception	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Nestle: Greenpeace reported some of Nestlé's active environmental responsiveness. But it also criticized it for its insufficient on its harmful products "if you care about the environment what's with your disposable coffee cups?" (Sauven, 2017 July)</li> <li>-Danone: Green peace reported the company's environmental harm caused by its plastic bottles.</li> <li>-Unilever: Greenpeace declared that Unilever as the second worst offender in marine plastic garbage. This is a way of reporting the environmental harm of Unilever's products.</li> </ul>	

Table 12. Unilever, Nestlé and Danone's CSR communication strategies, discursive legitimation strategies, and public perception before UNSDG

### 4.3. Conclusion of the Analysis

Before the UNSDG, the number of discursive legitimation strategies used by the companies was less on average than the number of strategies used after the UNSDG (See table 13). Furthermore, the number of CSR communication strategies remained the same in both periods (with the exception of

Nestle which did not use the strategy of “global success” during the first period, and only used it during the second period (Kim & Rader, 2010)) (See table 13). On the other hand, we see more active public perception during the second period relative to the first period. This is shown by the appearance of Greenpeace articles which did not exist during the first period. Furthermore, there was an increase in the virality of *The Guardian* articles during the second period as opposed to the first period. This means that there was more public interest in the matter of plastic waste during the second period as opposed to the first period.

To summarize the findings, table (13) show the CSR communication and discursive legitimization strategies used by the three companies, Greenpeace and *The Guardian* before and after the UNSDG. Table (14) shows the public perception of the companies as shown by *The Guardian* articles and Greenpeace articles. Figure 10 shows the number of Facebook shares of *The Guardian* articles in both periods. Finally, figure 11 show the online twitter activity for all three companies:

	Before UNSDG		After UNSDG	
	CSR and CAb (Kim & Rader, 2010)	Discursive legitimization strategies	CSR and CAb (Kim & Rader, 2010)	Discursive legitimization strategies
Nestlé	-Innovations in Research and development.  -Environmental stewardship.	----	-Innovations in Research and development.  -Environmental stewardship.  -Global success.	-Improvement (Luyckx & Janssens, 2016; Sillince & Brown, 2009)  -Promising reform (Seidl et al., 2012)  -Alliances (Kishna et al., 2017)
Danone	-Innovations in Research and development.  -Environmental stewardship.  -Global success.	-Improvement (Luyckx & Janssens, 2016; Sillince & Brown, 2009)  -Promising reform (Seidl et al., 2012)	-Innovations in Research and development.  -Environmental stewardship.  -Global success.	-Reporting improvement (Luyckx & Janssens, 2016; Sillince & Brown, 2009)  -Promising reform (Seidl et al., 2012)  -Alliances (Kishna et al., 2017)
Unilever	-Innovations in Research and development.  -Environmental stewardship.  -Global success.	-Improvement (Luyckx & Janssens, 2016; Sillince & Brown, 2009)  -Promising reform (Seidl et al., 2012)  -Alliances (Kishna et al., 2016)	-Innovations in Research and development.  -Environmental stewardship.  -Global success.	-Improvement (Luyckx & Janssens, 2016; Sillince & Brown, 2009)  -Promising reform (Seidl et al., 2012)  -Alliances (Kishna et al., 2016)

Table 13. Comparison between Nestlé, Danone and Unilever in CSR strategies and discursive legitimization strategies before and after the UNSDG.

	Before UNSDG	After UNSDG
	Discursive legitimation strategies	Discursive legitimation strategies
<i>The Guardian</i>	<p>-Nestle: The articles reported Nestlé’s lack of environmental responsiveness, product harmfulness and questioning the values of the firm’s environmental activities.</p> <p>-Danone: Reporting active environmental responsiveness, the benefits that companies can obtain from sustainability.</p> <p>-Unilever: Reporting active environmental responsiveness and positive progress.</p>	<p>-Nestle: The newspaper reported the company’s active environmental responsiveness as well as the harmful environmental impact some of its products.</p> <p>-Danone: The newspaper reported the company’s active environmental responsiveness.</p> <p>-Unilever: The newspaper reported the company’s active environmental responsiveness. It also reported occasional scrutiny for lacking significant results.</p>
Greenpeace	—	<p>-Nestle: Greenpeace reported some of Nestlé’s active environmental responsiveness. But it also criticized it for its insufficient on its harmful products “if you care about the environment what’s with your disposable coffee cups?” (Sauven, 2017 July)</p> <p>-Danone: Green peace reported the company’s environmental harm caused by its plastic bottles.</p> <p>-Unilever: Greenpeace declared that Unilever as the second worst offender in marine plastic garbage. This is a way of reporting the environmental harm of Unilever’s products.</p>

Table 14. Comparison between Greenpeace and *The Guardian* Discursive legitimation and delegitimation strategies before and after the UNSDG:

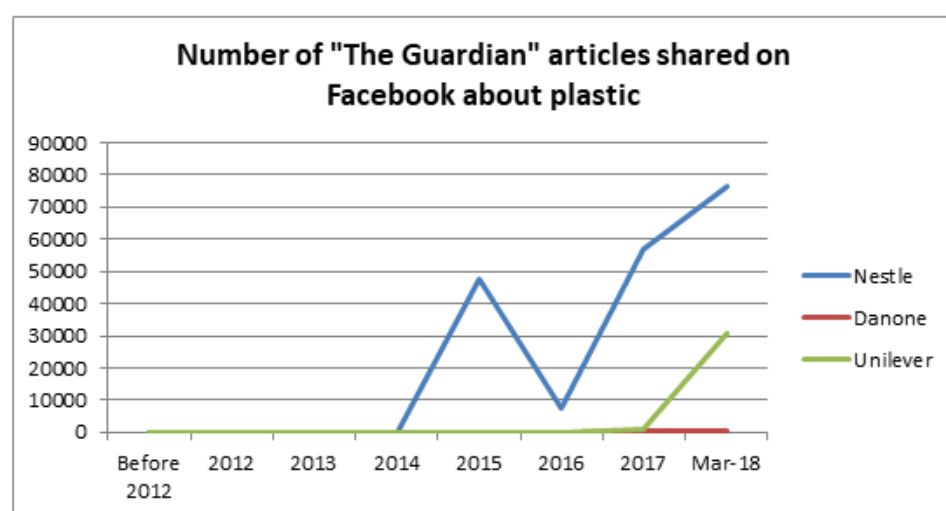


Figure 10. Number of Facebook shares of articles published on "The Guardian" about Nestlé, Danone and Unilever about plastics from 1999 till May 12th 2018.

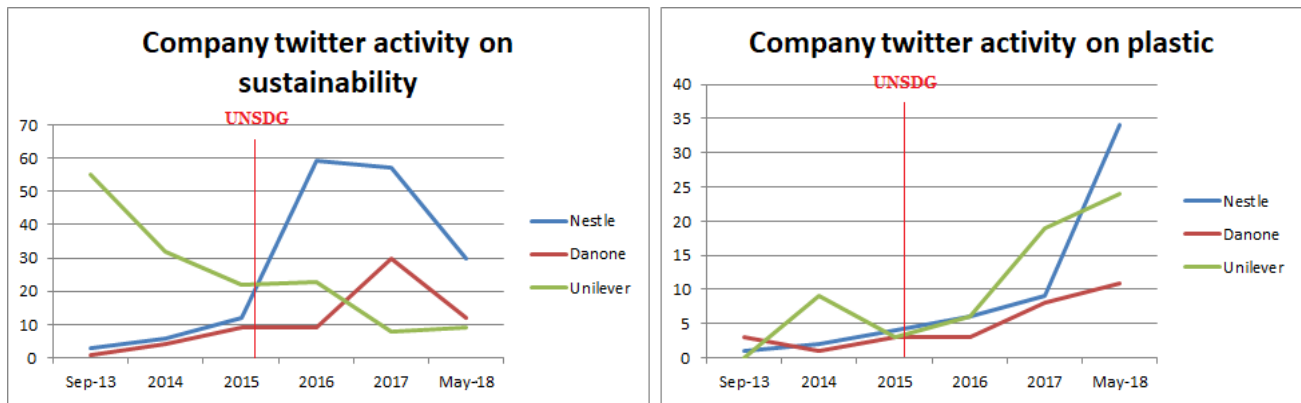


Figure 11. Tweets per company from September 25<sup>th</sup> 2013 till May 12th 2018.

## 5.0 Discussion and Conclusion

There is a clear difference in the behaviour of all three companies during both periods (see tables 13 & 14). It is possible that the companies that applied the CSR communication strategies of global success, environmental stewardship and research and development, were not heavily criticized before the UNSDG (Kim & Rader, 2010). However, this study did not measure this suggestion quantitatively, but it suggests the possibility that the implementation of these strategies did contribute to the legitimation process. In the same manner, the same companies also applied the discursive legitimation strategies of reporting improvement and promising reform, with an exception to Nestle (Luyckx & Janssens, 2016; Sillince & Brown, 2009; Seidl et al., 2012). However, these combinations of CSR and legitimation strategies were different during the second period.

During the second period, the companies that applied the same CSR communication strategies and discursive legitimation strategies had a different public perception than the ones they had during the first period. In theory, this should not happen since the mentioned strategies helped ensuring a company's legitimacy of their sustainability agendas. That is evident because during the first period, the only company which received scrutiny was the one who did not apply the mentioned strategies (Kim & Rader, 2010); Nestle did not apply the CSR strategy of global success, and the discursive legitimation strategies of promising reform and reporting improvement (Kim & Rader, 2010; Seidl et al., 2012; Luyckx & Janssens, 2016; Sillince & Brown, 2009).

Additionally, during the second period, the companies have also applied a new discursive legitimation strategy which is to form alliances in joining efforts to find sustainable solutions on plastic waste issues (Kishna et al., 2016). Yet the inclusion of this strategy did not prevent *The Guardian* and Greenpeace from increasing their negative comments that result in delegitimizing a

company's sustainability agenda. However, differences in the results using the same strategies in both periods could be attributed to the difference in the saliency of plastic waste as a global issue.

It is important to indicate also that Danone did not receive the same level of scrutiny that Unilever and Nestle did during the second period, this may be due to launching more brands and products with sustainable characteristics than the rest of the companies; such as products made of recyclable materials, bio-based plastics or eco-friendly alternatives. This might suggest that deploying a higher number of sustainable products can result in reduced scrutiny. In addition, this could be due to Danone's ability to reach its targets (promises) at a faster rate (closer deadlines) than the rest of the companies. Another trait worth mentioning is that Danone exceeded its sustainable targets ahead of schedule. This could mean that the company received less scrutiny because it behaved more proactively in sustainability for plastic waste solutions. Achieving sustainable goals in frequency and ahead of time may contribute to the reduced amount of scrutiny that a company receives from the public.

Global environmental acts like the UNSDG, which are a call to action, can be the cause that created this difference in a company's public perception in sustainability by increasing the saliency of plastic waste. Moreover, it affects the impact of a firm's CSR communication strategies and discursive legitimization strategies based on this increased saliency. In the context of this study, this could lead to two conclusions. First, that during the first period when plastic waste was less salient as an issue, the mentioned CSR communication strategies and discursive legitimization strategies were effective; since communicating environmental commitments could be seen as proactive company behaviour rather than a requirement for legitimacy. Second, during the second period when plastic waste was a more salient issue, the same CSR communication strategies and discursive legitimization strategies were less effective; since communicating environmental commitments became important values for the public and company compliance became a requirement to maintain legitimacy (Dowling & Pfeffer, 1975). In spite of increased communication and discourse after the UNSDG, the saliency of an issue proved to play a critical role in determining the effectiveness of the CSR communication strategies and discursive legitimization strategies. The result will affect the legitimacy of a company's sustainability agenda. Therefore, there is a two-part answer for the research question of this thesis, as shown below:

*During periods of low saliency of an environmental issue (such as plastic waste), the combination of Kim and Rader's (2010) CSR communication strategies of global success, environmental*

*stewardship and research and development, followed by the discursive legitimation strategies of promising reform and reporting improvement (Seidl et al., 2012; Luyckx & Janssens, 2016; Sillince & Brown, 2009) can support a company's legitimacy of its sustainability agenda.*

*On the other hand, during periods of high saliency of an environmental issue, the combination of Kim and Rader's (2010) CSR communication strategies of global success, environmental stewardship and research and development, followed by the discursive legitimation strategies of promising reform, reporting improvement and forming alliances might not influence a company's legitimacy of its sustainability agenda (Seidl et al., 2012; Luyckx & Janssens, 2016; Sillince & Brown, 2009; Kishna et al., 2016). However, other factors that were not included in the thesis such as activism and governmental pressures might have an influence on legitimacy during periods of high saliency.*

Nevertheless, the three discursive strategies of improvement, promising reform and alliances do contribute in the formation of company sustainability legitimacy. This is evident as Greenpeace and *The Guardian* newspaper are reactive to the content published by the companies via press releases, tweets and reports. Furthermore, each of these strategies was used in a context of sustainability to promote the environmentally friendly image of each company.

The saliency of an environmental problem can increase when addressed by international acts such as the UNSDG. It is clear that after the UNSDG that Greenpeace and *The Guardian* intensified their comments on the companies increasing both pressure on them as well as their saliency. This study took a new approach using CSR literature and discursive legitimacy literature to address the topic of sustainability. Previous studies have indeed shown the effects of sustainability and CSR on a company's legitimacy. CSR can affect a company's reputation and therefore its legitimacy (Hond et al., 2013). Aligning CSR communication strategies with social expectations do increase corporate legitimacy (Colleoni, 2013). And by applying these theories to the context of sustainability can contribute in the legitimation process of companies (Thomas & Lamm, 2011). Yet it is important to recognize that there is not a certain set of strategies that guarantee the positive stakeholder perception of the legitimacy of a company's sustainability agenda (Donoher, 2017). Other studies have already researched the topic of sustainability within the umbrellas of CSR and Legitimation even before the UNSDG. For example, Hond et al.'s, 2014 study (*Playing on two chessboards Reputation effects between corporate social responsibility and corporate political activity*) researched effective CSR communication strategies that contribute to a company's legitimacy in contexts relevant to



environmentalism. And Joutsenvirta & Vaara's 2009 study (*Discursive (de) legitimization of a contested Finnish greenfield investment project in Latin America*) identified discursive legitimization strategies relevant to today's context of sustainability. In agreement with these theories and the ones employed in this thesis, this thesis underscores the importance of CSR communication strategies and discursive legitimization strategies as mutually supportive theories in the role of shaping a company's sustainability agenda.

## 5.1 Managerial implications

A company's sustainability agenda takes time to establish its legitimacy. Therefore, in times where an environmental issue is low in saliency, it is possible to protect a company's legitimacy in sustainability by applying Kim and Rader's following strategies. These are the CSR communication strategies of global success (successfully launching a sustainable product on a global scale), environmental stewardship (continuous involvement in environmental activities), and research and development (Investing in the development of new sustainable products and solutions). In addition, a company should complement this approach using the discursive legitimization strategies of reporting improvement (announcing a company's progress in its sustainability programs), promising reform (setting impactful long-term sustainable goals), and engaging in alliances (joint efforts in developing sustainable solutions) (Seidl et al., 2012; Luyckx & Janssens, 2016; Sillince & Brown, 2009; Kishna et al., 2016).

During times of higher saliency, it is important to consider the following. Among the findings, we see that not all the companies received the same level of scrutiny. That Danone had the lowest level of criticism by Greenpeace and *The Guardian*. This means that either preceding the deadlines of a company's sustainable goals, and to deliver the company's promised results ahead of time does have an effect on the level of criticism it receives on its sustainability agenda. However, it is challenging for a company to achieve sustainable targets ahead of schedule. Instead, a company can set attainable sustainability goals to be achieved within over a time period to deliver sustainable results for the public.

More obvious managerial applications are to encourage companies to use a compliant approach regarding salient matters of environmental and sustainable practices (such as plastic waste management) (Oliver & Holzinger, 2008). The nature of sustainability legitimacy might not allow

firms to remain unreactive to environmental problems, and attempting to ignore or manipulate social perception on the matter could be risky.

Companies should make sure to promise sustainability goals (whether actual or not) in online and organizational discourse, specifically when the environmental problem is being anchored to the public perception. They should not rely on publishing content in high frequency (in discourse) on salient environmental issues, for this has not proven to be definitive in the discursive legitimation process.

Companies can maintain their legitimacy by engaging in strategic alliances that create a joint effort to face environmental challenges. These alliances support the companies' sustainability agendas and allow them to develop environmentally friendly solutions. The joint efforts of the partners support the legitimation process, particularly in meeting environmental challenges in their operations and products.

It is important to launch sustainable products (e.g. products packed in bio-based plastics) to gain approval and legitimacy. This increases the company's reputation in sustainability and grants it legitimacy in sustainability. More importantly, it is crucial to set additional long-term sustainability-related goals to support the company's sustainable agenda.

## 5.2 Research Limitations

This study is industry specific. A study that includes companies from different or diverse industries, (e.g. comparing companies from the energy sector, pharmaceutical sector and automotive sector) can give us a more generalizable insight on the concept of legitimacy and CSR communication in a context of sustainability and sustainable practices. It can help in the development of a theory that can be applicable to most industries regardless of their focus. Furthermore, perhaps the strategies of sustainability legitimacy that apply to companies from the same industry can be applicable only to that specific industry; in the example of my thesis, it is the food processing and beverages industry. But since it is narrowed to the selected industry in this thesis, it is risky to claim that this approach is applicable to firms across all industries with sustainable practices.

Sustainability is a broad topic. It is hard to isolate plastic waste from the rest of sustainability related issues of a company. Especially when wanting to determine a company's legitimacy for its sustainability agenda. Yet this study attempts to isolate plastic from other sustainability topics to

determine a company's sustainability legitimacy on plastic, and the results could not be generalizable on other facets of sustainability.

Environmental scandals could be relevant in other themes. Different operations of these companies use ecologically controversial processes that could damage its reputation such as palm-oil plantations that cause deforestation, or draining natural water resources from protected reserves. These events can be an additional cause a delegitimizing effect

### 5.3 Further Research

Collective firm action toward sustainable practices can have an effect on public opinion. It can benefit all contributing parties not by engaging into alliances only, but by allowing companies to reduce the delegitimation pressures they receive when there is a group of companies working in mass on the same milestones. Furthermore, alliances can lead to a situation where both companies sharing legitimacy as a consequence of sharing activities through their efforts to develop new sustainable alternatives. Future research on the concept of “Shared legitimacy” can contribute to the explanation of the benefits of sustainability related alliances and partnerships.

Further research into the topic of plastic waste might evolve; there is a rising industry of biodegradable and edible plastics and substitutes. These alternatives can be manufactured and can re-legitimize companies in new innovative sustainable practices, especially in nutrition based brands.

As for social media, more research can be done to discover the relationship between performance and discursive legitimacy through social media. Scholars can study the saliency of environmental issues (Such as plastic waste) in different countries to use discursive legitimization strategies separately targeted to address the most relevant sustainable issues in each country or region. In addition, social media influencers can be an important asset for companies to either help in making viral content, assisting discursive legitimization strategies. Or they can act with environmental activists in discursive delegitimation.

In this study, all three companies used partnerships in their sustainable programs after the UNSDG. It is possible to study the impact of partnerships on the legitimacy of a company's sustainability agenda. Particularly, how do partnerships impact sustainability in the light of politics and lobbying. Political events such as the USA leaving the Paris environmental agreements could allow

governments to influence the stance of companies depending on the political views of the regulatory bodies. The result can either facilitate corporate collaboration in further developing and encouraging sustainable initiatives, or they help them play down environmental consciousness by being lenient to non-compliant environmental conducts. At the same time, these events can help companies to deviate and allow non-compliance to sustainability.

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## 7.0 Appendix

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UN Foundation ( 2018, January 9) "'Clean water changes almost everything.'" Read about how @Nestlé is supporting #SDG 6: <http://bit.ly/2sKFU4a> #GlobalGoals "[tweet]

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