

An Overview of Research on Discursive Legitimation

Xiaofan Yu, Haicui Zheng*

Foreign Languages College, Inner Mongolia University, Hohhot, China

Email: *haicui@hotmail.com

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Abstract

Discourse plays an important role in the construction of legitimation. Numerous studies of discursive legitimation have been completed. However, few studies have reviewed relevant literature with a visual pattern, and a review that analyzes its trends is urgent. The study presents an analytical literature review of the research on discursive legitimation, aiming to provide an overview of and insights into a selected bibliography of 91 research articles on discursive legitimation. A bibliometric analysis using CiteSpace is applied to quantitatively and visually analyze relevant studies, followed by a close qualitative analysis to capture different classifications of legitimation strategies, main research methods, and hot topics.

Keywords

Discourse, Discursive Legitimation, Bibliometric Analysis, Overview

1. Introduction

Since the seminal work of Max Weber (Weber, 1977), the study of legitimacy has long been the concern of a range of academic disciplines striving to account for the key drivers of social transformation (Zappettini & Bennett, 2022). A large body of research has dealt with legitimacy from a plethora of perspectives, among which much work has focused on the process through which legitimacy is socially constructed, that is, legitimation, from social constructionist perspectives.

According to social constructionism (Berger & Luckman, 1966), a lot of things (e.g. identity, power, relation, national image, immigration) are said to be socially constructed, including legitimation, and language plays an important role in the construction of the social world. A constructionist view of language suggests that 1) language does not mirror an independent object world but con-

*Corresponding author.

structs and constitutes it; 2) no text represents reality in a neutral or objective way, and representation is never of reality as it really is (Barker & Galasiński, 2001). Studies in the social sciences have thus begun to examine the role of language and discourse in legitimation, especially since 2007 in which van Leeuwen's (2007) legitimation framework was proposed.

In recent years, the amount of research literature in the discursive legitimation domain has rapidly increased. New theoretical frameworks and methods in research emerge constantly. A bibliometric analysis with Citespace coupled with a qualitative analysis is conducted to gain a comprehensive overview of the fast-growing field of discursive legitimation. This research contributes to the analysis of discursive legitimation by providing 1) broad information on studies of discursive legitimation since 2007, including countries, keywords, and cited authors; 2) various classifications of discursive legitimation strategies; 3) different lines of research methods; and 4) major research topics.

2. What Is Legitimation?

Legitimation is widely studied and variously defined (Lamphere & East, 2016: p. 76). In theory and origin, "legitimation", also called "legitimization", refers to making something legal or legalized, but now the word is also used outside the legal jargon and often entails the meaning of "justification" (Reyes, 2011). Suchman (1995) points out that legitimation is purposive, calculated, and frequently oppositional, and offers a widely agreeable definition of legitimacy (the result of legitimation), suggesting legitimacy be 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, 1995: p. 574).

Since the past few decades, many scholars have examined the concept of legitimation and its linguistic representations in discourses, giving different definitions. Rojo and van Dijk (1997: p. 560) suggest that legitimation may be analyzed as "a social act of attributing acceptability to social actors, social actions, and social relations within the normative order". Van Dijk (1998: p. 255) stresses legitimation is a prominent function of language use and discourse. In a discourse analytical framework, legitimation can be defined as a social and political act accomplished by text or talk that provides good reasons, grounds or acceptable motivations for past or present action which has been or could be criticized by others. Chilton (2004: pp. 45-47) defines "legitimation and delegitimation" as one of strategic functions of political discourse, and the other two are "coercion", and "representation and misrepresentation". The legitimation function establishes the right of the regimes and their policies to be obeyed, while delegitimation is often used to attack the enemy of the regime or political actor. Van Leeuwen (2007: p. 93) argues that legitimation provides an answer to the question "Why?"—"Why should we do this?" and "Why should we do this in this way?" Cap (2008a: p. 7) sees legitimization as the principal goal of the political

speaker seeking justification and support of actions which the speaker manifestly intends to perform in the vital interest of the addressee. Reyes (2011: p. 782) suggests that legitimation refers to the process by which speakers accredit or license a type of social behavior. In this respect, legitimation is a justification of a behavior (mental or physical). Fairclough and Fairclough (2012: p. 242) draw on political theory and argue that legitimation is public justification, an argumentative process in which an action is justified in terms of reasons which can themselves, in turn, be justified as collectively accepted or recognized. The above definitions define legitimation from different aspects, but all stress its close relation to discourse, that is, legitimation is 1) a social act partly achieved through discourse; 2) a prominent function of discourse; 3) a principal goal of discourse; and also 4) a discursive process.

3. Methodology

The study provides a broad overview of the studies of discursive construction through a bibliometric analysis. Bibliometrics is a statistical analysis of extant literature and is used to provide quantitative analysis of publications in a given field. It analyzes categories like authors, keywords, references, journals, countries, institutions in a specific field. A bibliometric analysis is conducted with CiteSpace (6.2.R4) in this study to get 1) general information of the documentations, 2) the top most productive countries/regions, 3) hot spots, research paths and subjects, and 4) most cited authors.

CiteSpace is a Java-based application for analyzing cocitations and generating visual maps, as well as finding trends and patterns. The source of input data for CiteSpace in this study is the Web of Science. The Web of Science is one of the most excellent literature databases containing citation information sources crucial for this study. To obtain the original target articles' information, "legitimation" was used in the topic search. Several restrictions were set before the topic search. Firstly, the Web of Science Core Collection was used rather than All Databases so that articles would be of high quality in this field. Secondly, Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI) was used as citation indexes. Thirdly, the time span was set from 2007 to 2022. Fourthly, "Communication", "Linguistics", "Language linguistics" were set as the categories for further restriction, 363 articles were selected from the database. Finally, articles has little relevance with discursive legitimation were discarded, and the sample size was refined to 91, limiting the sample to the main discipline and the nature of "discursive legitimation". The search details are listed in **Table 1**.

Table 1. Summary of search details.

List	Details
Analysis software	Citespace
Source website	Web of Science
Database	SSCI (Science™ Core Collection)

Continued

Years	2007-2022 (16 years)
Categories	Communication, Linguistics, Language
Search words	legitimation
Sample size (citing papers)	91

4. Results and Discussion

The results from the bibliometric analysis are first presented, followed by a qualitative analysis of the articles.

4.1. Overview of the Literature**Document information**

Journal articles were identified as the only document type, which accounts for 100% (N = 91) of all papers in this study. Almost all the papers were published in English as the database of SSCI mostly consists of English journals rather than journals in other languages, and scholars tend to publish their articles in English as they want them to be widely accepted. An analysis of published documents by year from the earliest in 2007 to the cut-off year of 2022 reveals a steady increase in such studies since around 2014 (**Figure 1**). There is an obvious sudden increase in publications in this field, from 7 articles in 2020 to 19 articles in 2021, followed by a decrease to 17 articles in the subsequent year (shown in **Figure 1**). The increase in the number of articles published from 2020 to 2021 illustrates that discursive legitimation has become an active topic in recent years.

A total of 118 authors contribute to the 91 articles. Not only are there many authors contributing to the study of discursive legitimation, but there is also several key articles in the field (as yet). See **Table 2** for the top 10 articles with the highest citations in the search, including their citation statistics, which quantifies an article's impact. **Van Leeuwen (2007)** is the most influential document in the search (citations = 444), followed by **Vaara (2014)**, **Ross & Rivers (2017)**, **Oddo (2011)**, **Breeze (2012)**. To make the results more comprehensive, these articles will be closely read in the following analysis.

Countries

There are 46 countries/regions contributing 91 articles in this study, and the top 12 most productive countries/regions producing 72.53% of all articles are listed in **Table 3**. The United Kingdom ranks first by far, with 14 articles (Scotland 3 & England 11). People's Republic of China (PRC in **Table 3**) is second with 13 articles and the USA is third with 11 articles. Burst detection is applied to the countries to which authors were affiliated in terms of the growth rate of their citations. A burst of an event is a surge of the frequency of the event, such as the appearance of a keyword or the citation of an article. The time interval is depicted as a blue line. The period time in which a country is found to have a burst is shown as a red line segment, indicating the beginning year and the ending year of the duration of the burst. For example, at the top of the list, Australia

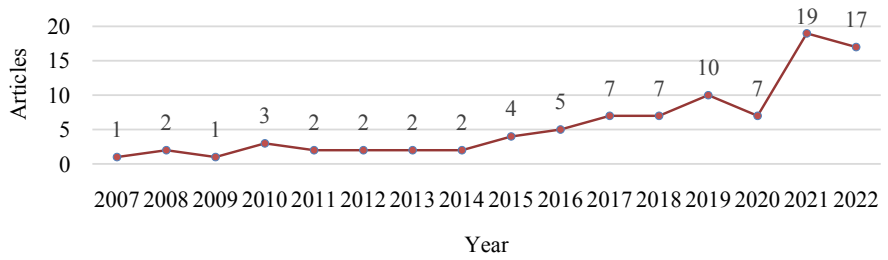


Figure 1. Number of articles for each year from 2007 to 2022.

Table 2. The Top 10 articles of citations.

Author	Year	Article	Citation
Van Leeuwen, T.	2007	Legitimation in discourse and communication	444
Vaara, E.	2014	Struggles over legitimacy in the Eurozone crisis: Discursive legitimation strategies and their ideological underpinnings	89
Ross, A. S. Rivers, D. J.	2017	Digital cultures of political participation: Internet memes and the discursive delegitimization of the 2016 U.S. Presidential candidates	81
Oddo, J.	2011	War legitimation discourse: Representing “Us” and “Them” in four US presidential addresses	64
Breeze, R.	2012	Legitimation in corporate discourse: Oil corporations after Deepwater Horizon	61
Peled-Elhanan, N.	2010	Legitimation of massacres in Israeli school history books	28
Doudaki, V.	2015	Legitimation mechanisms in the bailout discourse	27
Hart, C.	2017	“Riots engulfed the city”: An experimental study investigating the legitimating effects of fire metaphors in discourses of disorder	27
Mackay, R. R.	2015	Multimodal legitimation: Selling Scottish independence	24
Fonseca, P. Ferreira, M. J.	2015	Through “seas never before sailed”: Portuguese government discursive legitimation strategies in a context of financial crisis	22

Table 3. The top 12 countries/regions with the strongest citation bursts.

Country	Publication	Strength	Begin	End	2007-2022
Australia	8	2.05	2007	2012	
Chile	3	0.86	2011	2016	
Spain	7	1.77	2012	2016	
Finland	2	1	2014	2017	
Scotland	3	1.36	2015	2018	
Canada	2	0.98	2016	2018	
England	11	1.3	2018	2018	
USA	11	1.04	2019	2019	
PRC	12	1.81	2020	2022	
Italy	2	0.86	2020	2022	
Austria	3	0.86	2020	2022	
South Korea	3	0.99	2021	2022	

as the place of origin has a period of burst between 2007 and 2012 with the highest strength of 2.05, while Italy and Austria have strong bursts from 2020.

Keywords

The top keywords are displayed in **Figure 2**. Apart from the topic words “discursive legitimation” and “legitimation”, the most emerging word is “discourse”, followed by “strategy”, and “critical discourse analysis”, which indicates that discourse, strategy and critical discourse analysis (CDA) are all closest to the topic. In terms of discourse types, political discourse and media discourse are the major types (“political discourse”, “media discourse”, “media”, “news”, “politics”, “social media”, “political advertising”). In terms of research topics, the discursive legitimation involved in political events, e.g. war, Greek crisis, campaigns, political advertising, are the focus of legitimation studies.

Cited Authors

The most influential authors from the references are analyzed using the same slice configuration as keywords and are shown in **Figure 3** and **Table 4**. From

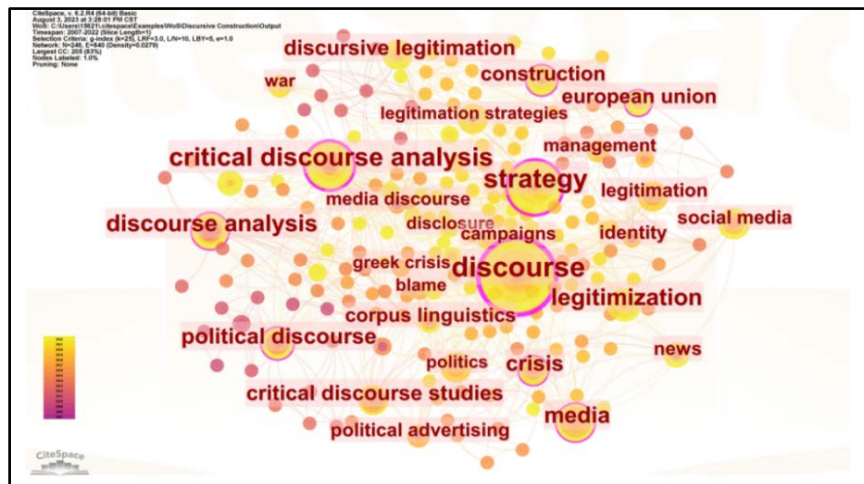


Figure 2. The map of keywords in co-citation relationship.

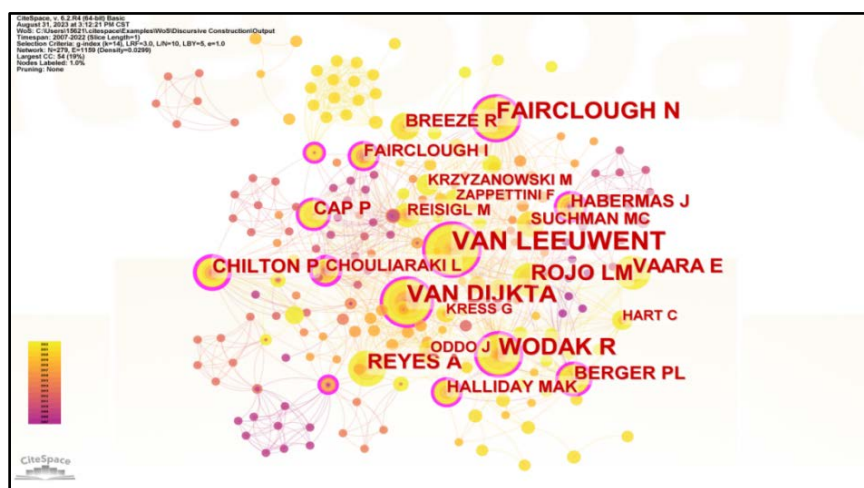


Figure 3. The map of cited authors.

Table 4. The top 18 authors of the references.

Cited Author	Count	Centrality	Year	Cited author	Count	Centrality	Year
Van Leeuwen, T.	63	0.10	2007	Berger, P. L.	15	0.13	2007
Van Dijk, T. A.	44	0.11	2012	Habermas	14	0.16	2007
Wodak, R.	42	0.11	2007	Breeze, R.	14	0.10	2014
Fairclough, N.	38	0.16	2009	Suchman, M. C.	12	0.06	2012
Rojo, L. M.	26	0.05	2018	Hart, C.	12	0.09	2019
Reyes, A.	22	0.05	2017	Halliday, M. A. K.	11	0.13	2007
Vaara, E.	21	0.03	2017	Fairclough, I.	11	0.13	2009
Chilton, P.	17	0.30	2009	Chouliaraki, L.	11	0.31	2011
Cap, P.	17	0.11	2009	Bennett, S.	11	0.05	1012

both **Figure 3** and **Table 4**, it can be seen that most of prominent scholars in the domain of critical discourse analysis, including van Leeuwen, van Dijk, Wodak, Fairclough, Chilton, Cap, Hart, are on the list, which shows the close relation between CDA and discursive legitimation studies. Van Leeuwen ranks the first, for his classification of legitimation strategies and his groundbreaking article “Legitimation in Discourse and Communication” (van Leeuwen, 2007) is widely spread and well applied. Van Dijk ranks second with 44 citations. The third and forth most influential authors are Wodak and Fairclough respectively. Works by other scholars in **Table 4** (e.g. Rojo, 1995; Rojo & van Dijk, 1997; Reyes, 2011; Vaara, 2014; Vaara & Tienari, 2008; Breeze, 2012; Suchman, 1995; Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Habermas, 1976; Fairclough & Fairclough, 2012) also have high citations.

4.2. Qualitative Reading of the Articles

Bibliometric analysis allows a quantitative summary of the literature data, but it may neglect the actual content of articles and be not adequate to provide a comprehensive review of a research field. A combination of the traditional bibliometric method with content analysis can make up for the method’s limitation. Therefore, a qualitative reading of articles has been done to identify emerging research frameworks, methods and topics in the studies of discursive construction after a bibliometric analysis.

4.2.1. Discursive Legitimation Strategies

It can be seen from **Figure 2** that strategies are central to the discursive construction of legitimation. The actual legitimation strategies and how they may be used for legitimation, delegitimation or re-legitimation have been extensively examined by linguists, especially critical discourse analysis practitioners. A great many taxonomies of legitimation strategies have been postulated.

Van Leeuwen’s (2007) framework of discursive legitimation strategies is the most widely received framework for legitimation in discourse, and is “the initial

‘jumping off’ point for subsequent critically discursive works on legitimation” (Bennett, 2022: p. 371). More than 25% articles collected in this study follow his classification of strategies. The comprehensive framework has an insightful starting point and takes some of the values, norms or criteria used in public justification and some argumentative schemes involved in public justification into consideration (Fairclough & Fairclough, 2012: p. 110). In the framework, van Leeuwen (2007) distinguishes 4 key categories of legitimation: authorization, moral evaluation, rationalization and mythopoesis, each of which has its own subcategories, suggesting that social practices can be legitimated by imposing authority, asserting moral values, highlighting their rationality, and presenting stories. The widespread taxonomy postulated by van Leeuwen has been adapted in many studies according to the distribution of different strategies in research data. For instance, Mirhosseini (2017) modifies the wording of the titles of categories at different levels and adds one minor category (labeling) under the major category of moralization, getting a framework that comprises four major categories (authorization, moralization, rationalization and mythopoesis) and eighteen minor categories to explore the legitimacy-building in Obama’s 2013 address on Syria.

With the development of the discursive legitimation field, more frameworks of legitimation strategies have been proposed. Reyes (2011) considers and further develops the categories proposed by van Leeuwen, identifying 5 key strategies of legitimization deployed by social actors to justify courses of action: 1) emotions (particularly fear), 2) a hypothetical future, 3) rationality, 4) voices of expertise and 5) altruism. Doudaki (2015) draws upon concepts from the theories of hegemony, social constructionism, and discourse, distinguishes 2 main legitimation mechanisms: naturalisation and objectivation. According to Doudaki, the first mechanism is built around symbolic annihilation, mystification and simplification while the second is constructed by expertise, institutional sourcing, quantification and reification. Lin (2021) develops an integrated framework of legitimation strategies from previous studies (Benoit, 1997; Fuoli & Paradis, 2014; Hahn & Lülfs, 2014; Suchman, 1995; van Leeuwen, 2007; Coombs, 2007), in which the strategies are grouped under four major categories: denial, deflection, mitigation, and admission. Lin (2021) suggests that in response to organizational legitimacy crisis, an organization may 1) deny problem, 2) emphasize the positive aspects, 3) minimize or rationalize problem, or shift blame, 4) admit and apologize for the problem. Yu & Yan (2021) propose a framework of documentary legitimation that recognizes two kinds of legitimation, direct and indirect legitimation. The former is legitimation through direct and unambiguous argument, while the latter does not make straightforward arguments. Direct legitimation can be achieved by voice-of-God commentary, expert speech, expository intertitles, witness testimony and audience observation; while indirect legitimation is achieved by performance, filmmaking process, and montage, metaphorical images and sounds. Hansson & Page (2022) identify three types of common legitimations in government’s blame avoidance: appeals to 1) personal authority

of policymakers, 2) impersonal authority of rules or documents and 3) goals or effects of policies.

4.2.2. Research Methods of Legitimation Studies

Different lines of development in the field of legitimation studies can be observed, making the field increasingly diversified in terms of methodologies. A main line is developed from [van Leeuwen's \(1995\)](#) Grammar of Legitimation. [Rojo and van Dijk \(1997\)](#) suggest that the socio-political and discursive act of legitimation may be analyzed at least at the pragmatic, semantic, and sociopolitical levels. They apply categories from Grammar of Legitimation when analyzing the semantic level which links to strategies of legitimation at the pragmatic level. [Van Leeuwen \(2007\)](#) develops his Grammar of Legitimation, and presents a more comprehensive methodological framework for the analysis of legitimation, that is, his framework of discursive legitimation strategies, including a detailed analysis of lexico-grammatical realizations of legitimations. [Reyes \(2011\)](#) further develops van Leeuwen's framework, and proposes the 5 key strategies of legitimization mentioned in 4.2.1. The above categorizations of strategies have been applied and modified in a bunch of legitimation studies. For example, [de la Rosa & Lázaro \(2022\)](#) combines van Leeuwen's and Reyes' frameworks, identifying 4 types of strategies in the analysis of meritocracy legitimation: 1) authorization (authority figures); 2) self-commitment (the meritocratic system); 3) altruism (moral justification); and 4) mythopoesis (storytelling). Based on van Leeuwen's categorization, [Bennett \(2022\)](#) proposes a two-staged approach for the further analysis of mythopoetic legitimation, with the first trying to ascertain the historical events that are included in the narrative, and second a micro-level analysis of the specific linguistic realizations.

A related line of development is multimodal. A notable multimodal legitimation framework is Mackay's. [Mackay \(2015\)](#) draws Wodak's discourse-historical approach, [Kress and van Leeuwen's \(2006\)](#) social semiotic approach, as well as [van Leeuwen's \(2007\)](#) and [van Dijk's \(2006\)](#) works on legitimation, and proposes an integrated framework framework comprises six levels, namely: multimodal resources, pragma-strategic level, justificatory schema, legitimation as a process, legitimation as a quality and discourse-historical moral evaluation. [Chaidas \(2018\)](#) points out that Mackay's framework still seems to lack an integrated conflation of the theoretical backgrounds of multifarious disciplines, and works in the direction of further merger of different fields by introducing some theoretical terms of narratology in multimodal legitimation research. [Pérez-Arredondo & Cárdenas-Neira \(2019\)](#) draw from [van Leeuwen's \(2008\)](#) social actor approach, and explore how actors make use of the multimodal representations of public space in news reports to achieve legitimacy. To explore the multimodal legitimation of hegemonic masculinity in military-themed games, [Elyamany \(2021\)](#) introduces a few modifications to Mackay's framework, proposing a more nuanced analytical framework, military-themed videogame multimodal legitimation model (MTV-MLM). The modal consists 8 levels: semiotic modes, cultural demands,

cultural context, spatio-temporal features, visual attitudinal values, visual graduation resources, auditory attitudinal values, auditory graduation resources.

Taking the cognitive dimension of legitimation into account, it is instructive to consider Chilton's (2004) Discourse Space Theory and Cap's (2008b) spatial-temporal-axiological (STA) proximization model. Chilton (2004) proposes a deictic centre along the space (s), time (t) and modality (m) axes. All entities and the relationships between them are anchored in these three axes which are defined relative to the center's (i.e. "self", the "speaker" or "we") location, time of uttering, and beliefs and values. He argues that spatial representation conceptualized either in terms of physical space or social relations is fundamental to this centre such that the positioning of people or things is scaled according to their relative closeness (here) to or remoteness (there) from self. A prominent example drawing on Chilton's model is Amer's (2009) analysis of Thomas Friedman's delegitimation of the second Palestinian Intifada in a column of the New York Times. He first analyzes the column's argumentative structure and moves employed in Friedman, then draws on Chilton's model and suggests a similar model for processing Friedman's text by proposing a similar deictic centre along spatial, temporal and modal axes. Cap (2008b) develops Chilton's theory of spatial proximization by adding temporal and axiological elements, building his spatial-temporal-axiological (STA) proximization model. Besides, critical metaphor analysis is also applied in discursive legitimation analysis. Hart (2017) employs experimental methods to investigate the legitimating framing effects of the metaphor CIVIL DISORDER IS FIRE found in media discourses of social unrest. The results shows that images of fire in multimodal news texts and fire metaphors in the absence of competing images both achieve framing effects in legitimating police use of water cannon. de la Rosaa & Lázaro (2022) identify four strategies that legitimize the core values in American society in commencement speeches: authorization, self-commitment, altruism, and mythopoesis, and analyzes the use of metaphor from a critical perspective.

Another independent line is argumentation. As Fairclough and Fairclough (2012: p. 110) suggest, there is an inherent link between legitimation and argumentation which van Leeuwen's framework fails to capture, and "it is only in arguments that we are giving reasons in support of a controversial proposition that stands in need of justification". Different theories of argumentation, including Reisigl and Wodak's (2001) outline of argumentation analysis in Discourse-historical Approach, Fairclough and Fairclough's (2012) argumentative schemes, van Eemeren and Grootendorst's (2004) pragma-dialectical approach, are applied in legitimation studies, analyzing the argumentative strategies, patterns and schemes in the legitimation processes. For example, Al-Tahmazi (2017) examines micro-argumentative patterns in 12 debate-like political interactions, finding that the interlocutors employed a number of argumentative patterns to legitimize their viewpoints, which were either action-oriented or actor-oriented. The former patterns are short-ranged in nature, focusing on the efficiency of the actions (de)legitimized, while the latter are used to legitimize the long-rooted

ideological biases about self and others. Kopf (2020) examines how the Wikipedia community makes sense of the European Union and how it legitimises the institution's existence through an argumentation analysis and from aspects of systemic functional linguistics. Catenaccio (2021) draws on discourse analysis and argumentation theory to investigate macro strategies of self-representation and patterns of dialogic interaction, including favoured argumentative schemes, and concrete linguistic choices at micro levels used to generate consensus and legitimation of their core activities.

4.2.3. Research Topics

According to the social actors involved in the studies, there are 2 major groups of research topics: governmental/political issues and corporate issues, the first of which are the focus of most articles collected.

It can be observed from Figure 2 that political discourse and media discourse are the major research subjects in discursive legitimation studies. There is no doubt that political discourse is related to politics, so are some media discourses, from which the close relation between legitimation and politics can be seen. Legitimation is prototypically political, and a large number of studies on legitimation deals with political issues, especially war (Björkqvall & Nyström Höög, 2019). When states or non-state actors wage war, serious rhetorical work is needed to construe the war as a legitimate one. Previous studies have shown that a wealth of legitimation strategies is employed in wartime rhetoric. Oddo (2011) presents an intertextual analysis of legitimation in four "call-to-arms" speeches by Franklin D. Roosevelt and George W. Bush, demonstrating how both presidents led the public into war. Oddo finds that representations of the past and future also function to legitimate violence, and the demarcation of group membership can discredit opponents of war at home and legitimate violence against non-aggressors abroad. Simonsen (2019) argues that legitimating local, particular wars by portraying them as universal and globally beneficial to populations that share epistemic and normative ideas is an effective strategy for achieving resonance.

A good few articles collected deals with corporate issues, involving corporate reports and other documents, interviews of company leader, social media presence, etc. Lin (2021) examines the discursive strategies UK and Chinese Fortune 500 companies used for communicating negative aspects in corporate social responsibility reports and shows how companies legitimize the bad news via the strategies of denial, deflection, mitigation and admission, as well as the differences in the legitimation efforts made by Chinese and UK companies. Breeze (2021) proposes a modified typology of legitimation strategies (normalization, authorization, rationalization, moralization and mythopoesis) based on previous research, and examines how these strategies are employed in the "letter to shareholders" published by the chairs of the five main UK-based banks over the ten years following the worldwide financial crisis of 2008 to salvage their reputation. The strategies are analyzed in terms of their object, target and interdiscursive features, and the persuasive roles of narrative and emotion are underlined.

Ho (2021) follows van Leeuwen's legitimation framework, and analyzes 19 interviews with Elizabeth Holmes. The study reveals how Elizabeth Holmes constructed the legitimation of her company's blood-testing service and constructed a revolutionary and trustworthy corporate image. Catenaccio (2021) investigates the social media presence of 3 companies and explores their self-legitimation aimed at generating consensus around their core activities and their business practices.

4.3. Discussion

This article begins with a brief review of the developmental history of research on discursive legitimation, the core scholars with their studies, the most productive countries/regions, and key research topics. Based on 91 articles published between 2007 and 2022, significant points emerged and a systematic overview of discursive legitimation was presented. The study identifies the key articles, countries, and keywords in the field, as shown in the tables and figures above.

Considering that information provided by CiteSpace is just a brief introduction to the publications, and some of critical details in the full papers may be missing, a qualitative reading of articles has been done to identify the various classifications of strategies and the emerging research methods in the field of discursive legitimation. Based on the bibliometric and content analysis, this article finds that the emergent field of discursive legitimation is fast growing, but it is far from mature, and there is still much room for development in the research subjects, research methods, research perspectives, research theories.

From the perspective of research subjects, existing literature shows that political discourse and media discourse are the major types, corporate discourse also has a place in relevant studies. As for genre, the development of internet and technology creates new genres constantly, and discourses of many of new genres have been the data of legitimation studies, showing different features. In terms of modality, although several multimodal legitimation frameworks has been proposed, most of legitimation studies focus on the construction of legitimation through single mode. The potential of multimodal discourse in a legitimation process has not been fully explored.

From the perspective of research methods, the previous studies usually follow a specific theoretical framework (e.g. van Leeuwen's legitimation framework), and carry out a top-down searching of a series of pre-set legitimation strategies. Since the strategies are preset, strategies not in the list or other critical features of discourses may be missed out. Therefore, a bottom-up exploration is necessary to make up the shortcomings of a top-down validation model.

In terms of research perspective, previous research on legalization strategies in the field of linguistics has mainly been conducted from the perspective of critical discourse analysis. Nevertheless, a single perspective will limit the analysis to the framework of CDA, which may lead to the overlook of the potential of other aspects of discourse in legitimation construction, and their manifestations in dis-

course. A combination of CDA and theories from other disciplines or branches of linguistics will be beneficial to the development of the emerging field of discursive construction.

From the perspective of research theory, most existing research on discursive legitimation strategies are based on van Leeuwen's classification of legitimation strategies. This analytical framework is groundbreaking and has become the theoretical basis for scholars to develop their strategy categories. However, this framework is restricted to a clearly classified categorization of strategies, showing the deficiency in the research methods mentioned above.

5. Conclusion

As research on discursive legitimation advances rapidly, it is critical to keep abreast of emerging methods and research focuses of the field. Using the Web of Science as a data source, 91 publications in social science citation index (SSCI) from 2007 to 2022 were captured for analysis. A bibliometric analysis of discursive legitimation that provides a broad overview of the literature, is complemented with a qualitative review. The study finds that 1) the United Kingdom is the most productive country followed by the People's Republic of China and the USA in terms of publication; 2) scholars are mainly focused on legitimation strategies, and usually conduct analysis from a critical discourse analysis perspective; 3) van Leeuwen's legitimation framework is the most widely received framework; 4) different lines of methods can be observed; and 5) political issues and corporate issues are the focus of legitimation studies. This literature review provides a unique review of the emerging research field, which is needed for future research and discussion about the power of discourse in constructing legitimacy.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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