This study examines the communicative grounds of democratic legitimacy in a hybrid political system, Singapore, by applying Habermas’s theory of communicative action. The theory holds that citizens will be more likely to accept the rightfulness of a political order to the extent that they recognize its orientation as being communicative, oriented to increasing reciprocal understanding with the public. Assessments of communicative action are indicated by 2 conditions: whether citizens agree with government claims and whether citizens perceive opportunities to engage in dialog with policymakers in public discourse. The communicative action approach is tested using the case of Singapore government’s action on smoking control. National survey results indicate that selected validity conditions and speech conditions are positively associated with legitimacy appraisals.

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Legitimacy refers to the basis upon which political authorities are entitled to make political decisions and why the public defers to political allocations of power (Weber, 1947). At the most general level, this concept represents the general acceptability of political authorities and is beyond “the merely external fact of the order being obeyed” (Weber, 1978, p. 946). Legitimacy denotes citizens’ perceptions of the authority as possessing the right to govern (Levi, Sacks, & Tyler, 2009). Such beliefs in legitimacy can expand to particular persons occupying the authority roles and the underlying ideological values, norms, and structures based on which a political authority executes political decisions (Easton, 1979). While the act of legitimation can be descriptive, a large literature on legitimacy has stressed its moral quality (Gutmann & Thompson, 2004; Hechter, 2009). For instance, Easton (1979) holds that legitimacy...
is rooted in each citizen’s perceptions of political authorities and power relations as “conforming to his own moral principles, his own sense of what is right and proper in the political sphere” (p. 278). In this view principles that motivate citizens to grant legitimacy to political authorities are grounded in the perceived moral rightfulness of government structures, officials, and decision-making processes (Crooke, 1987; Zelditch, 2001).

The normative character of legitimacy suggests that sentiments of legitimacy are justifiable (Gutmann & Thompson, 2004). Citizens would abide or agree with political authorities based on their beliefs in the procedural justice of political arrangements (Webler, 1995). The strong bond between procedural judgment and citizen attributions of legitimacy has been emphasized by a number of political psychologists and deliberative theorists (Cohen, 1997; Dryzek, 2000; Hegtvedt & Johnson, 2009; Tyler, 2001). With the belief that the government’s decision-making process is normatively fair and proper, citizens will generally be more willing to consider the authorities legitimate and worth paying attention to (Hechter, 2009).

In recent years growing attention has been paid to the empirical examination of legitimacy appraisals and procedural judgment (Carpini, Cook, & Jacobs, 2004; Levi et al., 2009; Zelditch, 2001). A need for more sophisticated framework for analyzing legitimacy and its grounds has also been widely advised (Hechter, 2009). To advance knowledge of theory-guided measures of legitimacy, this study conceptualizes and tests the communicative sources of legitimacy based on Habermas’s (1984) theory of communicative action. The theory holds that democratic legitimacy is attained when “there are good arguments for a political order’s claim to be recognized as right and just” (Habermas, 1979, p. 178). From a Habermasian perspective, democratic legitimacy must be based in communicative action, i.e., linguistic interactions aimed at increasing actors’ level of mutual understanding. Citizens are more likely to feel understood to the extent that they agree with government claims or believe they have sufficient availability of opportunities to communicate with political authorities about those claims. The perceived communicative interaction process can in return bring about citizen consideration of the government and its action as legitimate. This is a thesis expounded first in Legitimation Crisis and expounded most systematically in Between Facts and Norms (Habermas, 1975, 1996).

This article seeks to explore the extent to which the relationship between communicative action and legitimacy applies in Singapore wherein hybridity, that is, a combination of authoritarianism and democracy, is its defining characteristic (Haque, 2004; Means, 1996; Zhang, 2012, 2013). With its colonial history, Singapore inherited democratic mechanisms and values from the British but had not cultivated them fully in political practices (Means, 1996). As a result, although the “semiauthoritarian democracy” has led to efficient bureaucracy (Haque, 2004, p. 234), its restraints on press freedom and democratic governance have also been challenged (Freedom House, 2010; Reporters Without Borders, 2013). Scholars like Hill (2000) and Mutalib (2000) argue that in Singapore citizen support is tied to the government’s
efficiency in promoting economic growth and its ability to provide security and
prosperity. The emphasis on performance legitimacy has stabilized the power of
political authorities and has entitled the ruling party to employ an authoritarian
approach to policymaking and policy execution (Huntington, 1991; Wong & Huang,
2010). The hybridity of the political system in Singapore entails a tension between
nondemocratic and democratic components that may shape Singaporeans’ legitimacy
attributions in different ways. This provides an alternative and meaningful context
to examine Habermas’s action theory, which focuses on legitimation processes that
have a communicative ground.

Specifically, this article reports a case study involving Singaporeans’ assessments
of their normative support for the government’s action on smoking control. Although
smoking policies are in the health domain, they nevertheless are indicative of the
government’s general ruling style and ways of exercising political power. The action
theory postulates that communicative decision-making processes draw legitimacy
(Habermas, 1996). To test this theoretical argument, smoking policies were selected
based on the premise that citizens should be acquainted with this social issue well
enough to make assessments of government claims and to judge the perceived
procedural justice of government decision-making. Taking into account that in
Singapore the fear of expressing personal opinion on controversial topics exists, the
applied setting, which is closely related to citizens’ everyday experiences, was selected
to maximize the potential of outspokenness during data collection (Willnat, Lee,
& Detenber, 2002). In addition, smoking policies connote the demoralization of
smokers and social disapproval of smoking behavior (Thrasher, Besley, & González,
2010). Without denying the negative impact of smoking on health, debates remain
regarding how, when, and under what circumstances authorities should wield its
political power to control cigarette use (Jacobson & Zapawa, 2001). This suggests that
smoking control contains certain moral controversies that can be justifiably discussed
in a democratic society (Carter & Chapman, 2006; Poland, 2000). The studied
case thus provides a useful context for understanding how citizens’ assessments
of communicative conditions and fair decision-making can be applied to explain
legitimacy in a hybrid political system.

This study focuses on examining grounds based on which citizens approve of a
political order, by using a government’s control over cigarette use as an example.
The concept explored here differs from individuals’ favorable attitude toward specific
antismoking measures pertinent to the fulfillment of personal interests and demands,
which is an illustration of specific support in an Eastonian term (1979). Past research
indicates that citizens’ specific support for smoking policies can be associated with
demographic factors such as age, gender, education, and income, and smoking-
specific factors such as smoking status and general attitude toward smoking (Borland
et al., 2006; Brooks & Mucci, 2001; Lader, 2007). However, if as Habermas’s theory
posits, legitimacy is rooted in citizen acknowledgment of the procedural fairness of
lawmaking, then individuals’ evaluation of communicative conditions should play
an important role in accounting for legitimacy appraisals in addition to whatever
their personal dispositions would do. This implies that at the empirical level there should be a strong association between citizens’ perceptions of fair decision-making and their beliefs in the rightfulness of government action after the effects of personal characteristics are controlled.

The article begins with a review of two sets of communicative conditions, validity claims and speech conditions, that can be used to evaluate citizens’ procedural judgment of government action. The theoretical relationship between communicative action and legitimation is presented and hypotheses are specified. In the second part of the article an empirical study is presented that tests perceived achievements of communicative action in the Singaporean setting. The conclusion summarizes results and discusses implications of the communicative action approach for future studies on legitimation.

Theory of communicative action for a legitimation model

Validity claims and speech conditions

Habermas’s analysis holds that communication necessarily involves interactants in two sets of assumptions. These are assumptions regarding validity claims and speech conditions underlying all utterances, explained below. The analysis derives from a range of philosophers and linguists, drawing in part on Wittgenstein’s work, drawing heavily from that of John Searle on expressibility and John Austin on locutionary and illocutionary elements of language, and deriving as well as from a number of other philosophers and linguists. Its early introduction to the English-speaking world is found in the essay “What is Universal Pragmatics” (Habermas, 1979, pp. 1–68). Its later elaboration was advanced in Theory of Communicative Action (Habermas, 1984; Habermas, 1987), and in subsequent works. Our use of the theory here draws directly from this element of Habermas’s work, though necessarily rather lightly.

This study is not an effort to fully test the richness of the theory of communicative action, which is not likely possible. Habermas is clear in his intent that this theory should “be capable of being checked against speakers’ intuitions, scattered across as broad a sociocultural spectrum as possible” (Habermas, 1984, p. 138). He also suggests a number of strategies that should be useful for empirical evaluation of the theory. These include “analyzing pathological patterns of communication in families,” and “examining the ontogenesis of capabilities for action” following Piaget’s research into the ontogenesis of cognitive capabilities (p. 138). It is certain that the theory is not falsifiable in a strict sense. But a widely held view maintains that the theory is “fallible” in the face of empirical evidence, and thus remains open to empirical examination (Chambers, 1996, pp. 110–122; Cooke, 1997, pp. 2–3). Our research employs the theory to generate communicative hypotheses related to legitimation and tests these for their fruitfulness.

This model employing validity claims and speech conditions has been presented elsewhere (Chang & Jacobson, 2010a; Jacobson & Storey, 2004). Briefly, Habermas postulates that four kinds of basic claims are embodied in all speech acts or utterances.
These are validity claims including: (a) whether the utterances are comprehensible; (b) whether the content holds true; (c) whether the speech act is normatively appropriate; and (d) whether the speaker sincerely means what he or she says. In action oriented to reaching reciprocal understanding, communicative action proper, speakers must have consciously or unconsciously accepted the promise to fulfill all four validity claims if asked. Notably, these criteria for communicative action are not merely normative guidelines but are based on the empirical proposition that speakers actually make all these assumptions and are willing to discuss them during everyday communication (Habermas, 1984, pp. 273–338).

When disagreement over a claim is challenged, communicative action may follow if the listener chooses to contest a claim and if the speaker is both open to being challenged and willing to use good reasons in defense of the claim. Ultimately, the fact of agreement is a separate matter from speakers understanding one another’s viewpoints, or being oriented to understanding them. For example, in the applied setting communicative action can be presented in two ways. The government’s decision-making process may be considered communicative when citizens agree with its validity claims and feel no need to bring up any discussion over problematic propositions. Alternatively, even if citizens disagree with certain government claims, they may still consider the process communicative to the extent that they feel they can argue about any disputable claims if they want. Although at the theoretical level communicative action involves both the speaker and listeners’ perceptions of the communicative conditions, this study only focuses on citizen evaluation of the government’s communicative orientation with an aim to test its relationship with legitimacy appraisals.

The dialogically verifiable nature of validity claims relates to the second set of criteria for communicative action, referred to as speech conditions or “general symmetry conditions” (Habermas, 1984, p. 25; Habermas, 1990, p. 88). Speech conditions are actors’ presuppositions regarding the exchange of arguments that enable the examination of contested validity claims to take place.

Speech conditions comprise expectations relevant to the structural settings of discourse insofar as they are essential to any dialog. During communicative action speakers presume the freedom to engage in sufficient and unrestricted discussion on everything required to settle a contested claim, to make a collectively agreeable decision based on mutual understanding. Every actor should be able to “take part in a discourse,” “question any assertion whatever,” “introduce any assertion whatever into the discourse,” and “express his attitudes, desires, and needs” (Habermas, 1990, p. 89). Additionally, all participants should not be “prevented, by internal or external coercion, from exercising his rights as laid down [above]” (p. 89). Although ideal speech conditions are often not attainable in daily contexts, they operate as expectations in all communication, even during strategic or deceptive communication.

Previous research suggests that three speech condition indexes can be used to examine rules of democratic discourse in the context of public policymaking: (a) whether citizens believe that they or their surrogates can freely raise for discussion
any problematic validity claim with which they may disagree—all proposals and counterproposals can be entertained; (b) whether citizens believe that all citizens have a symmetrical distribution of opportunities to engage in discourse—symmetry; and (c) whether citizens believe that they will receive full and fair responses from the government—fair treatment (Chang & Jacobson, 2010a; Jacobson & Storey, 2004). These indexes reflect the extent to which a communication environment is restriction-free. To the extent they are satisfied, they enable genuine dialog instead of interactions coerced by external or internal factors.

It should be noted again, that this account of validity claims and general symmetry conditions only sparsely represents Habermas’s elaborate justification of a framework for the “validity basis” of speech, and it relies somewhat more heavily on universalist and procedural aspects of the theory (Habermas, 1990, pp. 87–88). We intend our selective employment to be justified through predictive validity.

Given this interpretation of Habermas’s theory, the validity and speech condition framework can be used as a practical guide to testing when actors believe communicative action has been possible. The two sets of communicative conditions can be used to test the extent to which citizens believe that a government’s positions, or validity claims, are correct and the extent to which they feel that the government’s interactions with the public, or its enactment of speech conditions in the public sphere, are oriented to advancing mutual understanding between government and citizenry.

The communicative grounds of democratic legitimacy
In Habermas’s analysis of democratic legitimation citizens approve of a political order because they have good reasons to believe in its rightfulness. In democratic political systems these reasons, according to Habermas, are enacted in large part through citizen reactions to a government’s communicative rationality. “Specifically, the democratic principle states that only those statutes may claim legitimacy that can meet with the assent (Zustimmung) of all citizens in a discursive process of legislation” (Habermas, 1996, p. 110).

This is not a statement regarding interest calculations. Linguistic action is not merely sentential, a matter of well-formed sentences and proper interactions used to advance instrumental purposes. In addition, language produces and reproduces social relations in fundamental ways, enacting promises, threats, praise, and so on, tying words to experienced social norms. Referring to Kant and Rousseau on the relationship between individual autonomy and collective norms, Habermas (1996) makes his case this way:

Both conceptions miss the legitimating force of a discursive process of opinion- and will-formation, in which the illocutionary binding forces of a use of language oriented to mutual understanding serve to bring reason and will together—and lead to convincing positions to which all individuals can agree without coercion. (p. 103)

In other words the value of free speech is not embedded in expectations due to natural law. Rather it is embodied in pragmatically necessary conditions of social interaction through communication. It is this line of thinking that underlies
Habermas’s theory of the public sphere. The theory is very much rooted in the Western deliberative democracy tradition valuing citizen expression of opinions and political authorities’ fair responses to public concerns. Two elements of Habermas’s analysis of the public sphere make it unique. One is the formal pragmatic approach to examining structural properties required of dialog in the public sphere if discursively democratic legitimation is to be possible and effective (Habermas, 1984). The second is the tie between communicative action and justice, or what Habermas (1990) calls the “moral standpoint.” Communicative action underlies not only citizen motivation to attribute democratic legitimacy but the moral rightness of such legitimacy attributions.

Habermas is not the first to argue a communicative basis for legitimation. Lucien Pye held that accountability requires communication. “The communications process provides a basis for limiting and making explicit the legitimate scope of political causality so that leaders and citizens can all be compelled to accept the same sense of the plausible” (Pye, 1963, p. 7). Additionally, a number of theorists have addressed the subject of discursive or dialogic democracy in recent years (Dryzek, 2000; Gutmann & Thompson, 2004; Warren, 1995).

Critics charge that Habermas’s dialogic approach is idealistic, rationality-driven, ignorant of power imbalances, and insensitive to otherness (White, 1991). These varied criticisms issue from a variety of philosophical positions and it is beyond the scope of this article to review the large associated body of literature. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the theory fully recognizes such discourses are somewhat “improbable forms of communication” (Habermas, 1982, p. 235). The theory of communicative action does recognize power and its use in everyday interaction in a number of ways. Action that is not oriented towards the discursive negotiation of validity claims is analyzed as “strategic” action, as action oriented toward reaching purposive goals (Habermas, 1984, p. 333). Varieties of strategic action include imperative forms of communication, outright deception, and ideological control.

A growing number of studies apply the action theory empirically to the study of linguistic interactions in social and political processes (Barry, Stevenson, Britten, Barber, & Bradley, 2001; Leanza, Boivin, & Rosenberg, 2010; Sumner, 2001; Walseth & Schei, 2011; Webler, 1995). The study reported here expands on previous research on communicative action and legitimation in the United States (Chang & Jacobson, 2010a; Jacobson & Jun, 2006), by using it in the hybrid political system of the city-state of Singapore. The democratic legitimacy under consideration is the general acceptability of the government in terms of its exercise of political power to control cigarette use.

The Singapore government’s action on smoking control is multifaceted. Extant regulations include bans on duty-free cigarettes, on the advertising of tobacco products including tobacco brand names, and on smoking in most outdoor and indoor public places including residential areas (National Environment Agency, 2013). The sales and distribution of cigarettes are rigorously regulated and monitored. Strict penalties are imposed on those who violate the smoking act (Ministry of

Whilst policymaking and policy execution involve political authorities’ use of political power and their continual interaction with the public, it is useful to investigate the extent to which Singaporeans agree with the government’s communicative orientation and consider its action fair and just. From a communicative action perspective, the key questions lie in whether the government has a perceived inclination to seek a shared understanding with the public. If citizens consider the government’s decision-making process communicative, their positive perceptions should cultivate their normative support for the government. At the empirical level, such a proposition should be presented in the form of a positive association between either set of communicative conditions and legitimacy appraisals.

The action theory posits that citizens will evaluate government legitimacy based on their perceptions of the validity of government claims along with their perceptions of the freedom for citizens or their surrogates to engage in dialog about these claims. To test such a theoretical prediction, this study hypothesized that communicative action variables, including both validity and speech condition perceptions, should affect citizen attributions of legitimacy. The action theory holds that in any given speech act all validity claims are assumed simultaneously. Nevertheless, some of them may be more thematically important than others in a given setting (Cooke, 1997), and previous research seems to bear this out (Chang & Jacobson, 2010a). This suggests that the most salient validity conditions accounting for citizen approval or disapproval of government action may vary depending on individual contexts. For example, a political authority’s appropriateness claim may be perceived as acceptable whilst its perceived grasp of facts pertinent to a health program, that is, the truth claim, may be doubted. Additionally, certain speech conditions might be more relevant than others for legitimacy attributions in political systems holding different legislative norms. In America, communicative opportunities may abound through press conferences even while real exchanges in which citizen questions are fully answered to the satisfaction of citizens may be infrequent. In the case of Singapore, it is likely that speech symmetry could be rather weak, in spite of which citizen beliefs in government validity claims may be fairly strong.

Singaporean leadership fashions the country as a hybrid form of democracy, though from a Western perspective this may seem doubtful. If it is democratic from a Western perspective, then sentiments of the government’s rightfulness to control cigarette use should be accounted for by the perceived fulfillment of speech conditions or the perceived acceptability of the government’s related claims. Thus, the following hypotheses are implied. H1: Perceived comprehensibility will be positively associated with legitimacy. H2: Perceived truth will be positively associated with legitimacy. H3: Perceived appropriateness will be positively associated with legitimacy. H4: Perceived sincerity will be positively associated with legitimacy. H5: Ability to raise any propositions will be positively associated with legitimacy. H6: Symmetrical
opportunities will be positively associated with legitimacy. H7: Fair treatment of propositions will be positively associated with legitimacy.

Method

Procedures
A random-digit-dial telephone survey of Singapore citizens and permanent residents, age 21 years and older, was conducted by trained interviewers from a Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing Laboratory (CATI Lab) at a university in Singapore between January 17 and March 6, 2011. The questionnaire was made available in English, Mandarin, and Malay. The last two language versions were developed using a standard translation-back-translation process. Telephone numbers were drawn from a dataset provided by the national telecommunications provider. The last four digits of numbers were randomly generated to provide representation of both listed and unlisted numbers. Telephone numbers were called back up to four times in an attempt to complete interviews. Ethical approval was obtained from a university’s institutional review board to protect the interests of participants.

Participants
A total of 2,081 respondents completed the survey. The minimum response rate was 34%, using AAPOR formula RR1. Of all respondents reached, the cooperation rate (AAPOR COOP1) was 60% (American Association for Public Opinion Research, 2009).

The gender of the participants was approximately even with 1,046 males and 1,035 females. Participants’ ages ranged from 21 to 90 years ($M = 43.05, SD = 14.02$). The distribution by ethnic background was: Chinese (75%), Malay (11%), Indian (10%), and other (4%). Respondents’ gender, age, and ethnicity were similar to the known distribution of the Singapore population (Department of Statistics, 2011). Smoking prevalence in females (4%) corresponded to the National Health Surveillance Survey 2007 while that in males (16%) was slightly lower than the national average (Chua, 2009).

Measures
This study tested four validity condition variables, three speech condition variables, seven demographic and smoking-related variables, and one dependent variable, legitimacy. The separation of individual validity and speech condition variables was based on the theoretical consideration that certain communicative conditions might be more important than others in a given circumstance, suggesting a need to test their unique effects on legitimacy separately (Habermas, 1979). Each of the theoretical variables was evaluated as a latent variable with two to four observed indicators. Observed items were adapted from previous research on perceived fairness of smoking policymaking in the United States and Singapore that had demonstrated satisfactory reliability and validity (Chang & Jacobson, 2010a, 2010b; Chang, Jacobson, & Soon, 2011).
Perceived validity conditions

Perceived validity conditions referred to four latent variables, each referring to a basic speech principle based on which citizens assessed their levels of agreement with government propositions. Observed indicators for all validity condition variables were scored on a 5-point scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. “Perceived comprehensibility” referred to citizens’ perceived understanding of the literal meaning of government propositions. Four items were used to measure the extent to which respondents felt that the government’s explanations of its action on smoking control were intelligible: “I think the government’s messages about cigarette use are comprehensible”; “I think I understand why the government wants to control cigarette use”; “I think the government provides citizens with a clear explanation of its action on smoking control”; and “I think I understand the health issues associated with the government’s smoking control measures” (\(M = 3.80, SD = 0.51, \alpha = .72\)). “Perceived truth” referred to citizen agreement with the perceived accuracy of information provided by the government. A 4-item measure was used to test the extent to which respondents felt that the government offered factually accurate information based on their current knowledge: “I think the government exaggerates the negative consequences of cigarette smoking”; “I think smoking-related information given by the government twists the known scientific facts”; “I think the government uses some form of dramatization to make cigarette smoking look worse than it really is”; and “Those dreadful consequences of cigarette smoking claimed by the government will not happen to most smokers in real life” (\(M = 3.19, SD = 0.70, \alpha = .71\)). “Perceived appropriateness” referred to citizens’ evaluation of the adequacy of the government’s approach to smoking control. Three items were developed to measure the extent to which respondents felt that the government implemented smoking regulations in an appropriate manner: “I think the government imposes too many restrictions on cigarette use”; “I think the government pushes too hard to control cigarette use”; and “I think the government’s forceful approach to controlling cigarette use is not appropriate” (\(M = 3.41, SD = 0.75, \alpha = .76\)). “Perceived sincerity” referred to citizen beliefs that the government’s manifest intentions to control cigarette use were genuinely meant. A three-item measure was used to test the degree to which respondents felt that the government’s genuine intentions to impose smoking restrictions were meant in the way they were expressed: “I think the government controls cigarette use because they genuinely care about citizens’ health”; “I think the government cares more about citizen welfare than public control”; and “I think the government is sincere in protecting the interests of both smokers and nonsmokers” (\(M = 3.58, SD = 0.58, \alpha = .63\)).

Perceived speech conditions

From a theoretical perspective, speech conditions are satisfied when citizens feel that the structural setting does not restrict them or their surrogates from engaging in argumentation if they want to. This implies that citizens’ assessments of speech conditions may be based on their general observations of the rules of discourse,
rather than on their specific participatory experience (Habermas, 1990). Three latent variables were used to reflect the extent to which the perceived speech conditions approximated the ideal argumentative situation. All observed items were measured on a 5-point scale (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree). “Ability to raise propositions” referred to respondents’ perceptions of their freedom to express concerns about the smoking policies. Three items were used to measure the degree to which respondents felt that they or their surrogates could freely raise any questions about the government’s action on smoking control: “I think the government would not encourage citizens like me to express concerns about its action on smoking control”; “I think citizens like me have limited capacity to freely raise questions about the government’s action on smoking control”; and “I think if citizens like me question the government about its smoking control measures, we would get into trouble” ($M = 3.14$, $SD = 0.69$, $\alpha = .65$). “Symmetrical opportunities” referred to respondents’ evaluation of the symmetrical distribution of opportunities for them and other citizens to take part in public discourse if they want to. A two-item measure was used to test the extent to which respondents felt that different social groups would have equal opportunities to engage in dialog with the government about its action on smoking control: “I believe some social groups would have a larger voice when the issue is about smoking control” and “I believe some social groups have more avenues to affect the government’s action on smoking control” ($M = 2.61$, $SD = 0.72$, Pearson’s $r = .44$, $\alpha = .61$). “Fair treatment of propositions” tested respondents’ perceptions of the government’s fair and full consideration of propositions raised by citizens. Three items were used to test the degree to which respondents felt that the government attended and responded to citizen concerns about its action on smoking control: “I believe the government would give a fair consideration to what citizens think about smoking control”; “I believe the government would respond fully to citizen concerns about smoking control”; and “I believe the government would listen to citizens like me even after they make the decision to control smoking” ($M = 3.44$, $SD = 0.68$, $\alpha = .77$).

**Legitimacy**

In this study legitimacy was defined as citizens’ general acceptance of the government in terms of its control over cigarette use. As discussed above, legitimacy is the worthiness of political authorities to be recognized, stemming from citizens’ rationally motivated agreement on the normative rightfulness of government action. Legitimacy attributions are awarded in part based on citizen beliefs that government is willing to interact in explaining, or justifying, its proposals. It is a two-way process. But the outcome of the process is a one-way judgment from citizens who give or withdraw support. Thus, for the purposes of testing the legitimation hypothesis, it is sufficient to observe the legitimacy relationship from the viewpoint of citizens alone. Three items were used to measure the extent to which respondents believed that the government’s action on smoking control was worthy of their support: “I feel it is right for the government to take action to control cigarette use”; “The government’s
action on smoking control is worth my support”; and “I personally approve the way
the government uses its power to control smoking” \((M = 3.78, SD = 0.58, \alpha = .79)\).

**Demographics**

Demographic variables often associated with citizen satisfaction with smoking policies were tested in the applied setting (Thrasher et al., 2010). They were gender, age, ethnicity, education, monthly household income, and cigarette use. To control for the effect of participants’ favorable or unfavorable evaluation of smoking on their normative support for the government, their attitude toward smoking was also tested (Borland et al., 2006; Brooks & Mucci, 2001; Lader, 2007). The measure of attitude consisted of five items using 5-point semantic differential scales: “In my opinion, I think smoking is . . . (bad/good, unhealthy/healthy, unsexy/sexy, unpleasant/pleasant, and harmful/harmless)” \((M = 1.70, SD = 0.57, \alpha = .84)\).

**Results**

This study hypothesized that participants’ perceived communicative conditions could significantly account for their support for the government’s action on smoking control. Structural equation modeling (SEM) analyses with maximum likelihood were performed using AMOS 20.0 to test factor structures of the latent communicative condition variables and their direct effects on legitimacy. A four-step sequence of tests was involved (Bowen & Guo, 2012). First, a common factor model with all observed indicators of the latent variables was tested using exploratory factor analyses (EFA). Second, Bollen’s (2000) “jigsaw piecewise” technique was used to fit the measurement model by adding one latent variable and its indicators into the model at a time (p. 79). Confirmatory factor analyses (CFA) were performed at each stage. Third, tests of the full measurement model and alternative models were performed. Fourth, a general structural equation model, containing all latent variables and the control variables, was performed to test hypotheses. Hu and Bentler’s (1999) dual criteria of a comparative fit index (CFI) value close to .95 and a cutoff value close to .06 for the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) were used to evaluate model fit. EFA results showed that all observed items were loaded on their corresponding variables and tests for all factor loadings were significant. The seven latent communicative condition variables and one latent legitimacy variable were then entered into the measurement model in turn. At each stage model fit was tested to locate specific sources of poor measurement fit. CFA results showed that the complete measurement model, containing eight latent variables, achieved adequate model fit, \(\chi^2(247) = 718.54, p < .05; \text{CFI} = .97; \text{RMSEA} = .03\) (90% confidence interval = .028, .033). Tests of alternative models did not yield better model fits. In the structural model all communicative condition factors were treated as exogenous latent variables and each had a structural path to the endogenous variable, legitimacy. The structural model also contained observed, control variables that were allowed to covary as exogenous predictors of legitimacy. Zero-order correlations of all variables are presented in Table 1.
### Table 1: Correlation Matrix of Control Variables, Communicative Condition Variables, and Legitimacy

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<td>4. Education</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>.30**</td>
<td>-.06**</td>
<td>-.05*</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>.16***</td>
<td>.15***</td>
<td>-.05*</td>
<td>.13***</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td>-.03</td>
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<td>5. Income</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>.13***</td>
<td>.14***</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td>.09***</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>-.06*</td>
<td>.02</td>
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<td>6. Smoker</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>.34***</td>
<td>-.12***</td>
<td>-.21***</td>
<td>-.37***</td>
<td>-.16***</td>
<td>-.21***</td>
<td>.05*</td>
<td>-.15***</td>
<td>-.34***</td>
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<td>7. Smoking attitude</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>-.18***</td>
<td>-.30***</td>
<td>-.37***</td>
<td>-.17***</td>
<td>-.21***</td>
<td>.04</td>
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<td>-.33***</td>
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<td>8. Comprehensibility</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>.09***</td>
<td>.19***</td>
<td>.42***</td>
<td>.23***</td>
<td>-.05*</td>
<td>.31***</td>
<td>.41***</td>
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<td>9. Truth</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>.52***</td>
<td>.09***</td>
<td>.40***</td>
<td>.09***</td>
<td>.10***</td>
<td>.27***</td>
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<td>10. Appropriateness</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>.15***</td>
<td>.44***</td>
<td>.08***</td>
<td>.20***</td>
<td>.44***</td>
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<td>11. Sincerity</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>.25***</td>
<td>-.09***</td>
<td>.44***</td>
<td>.47***</td>
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<td>12. Raise propositions</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>.10***</td>
<td>.33***</td>
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<td>13. Symmetry</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>-.11***</td>
<td>-.10***</td>
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<td>14. Fair treatment</td>
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<td>.44***</td>
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<td>15. Legitimacy</td>
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Note: Education (above secondary school) and income (monthly household income above the national average of SGD$7,000 in 2011) are dummy variables; *p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001.
Fit indices indicated an adequate fit of the general structural equation model, $\chi^2(349) = 1019.75$, $p < .05$; CFI = .96; RMSEA = .03 (90% confidence interval = .028, .033). The final model explained 67% of the variance in legitimacy ($R^2 = .67$). All indicators of communicative conditions and legitimacy were loaded on the corresponding factors. All standardized within-factor item loadings were above .50 except for one indicator of perceived sincerity (factor loading = .49). Beta coefficients indicated that perceived sincerity ($\beta = .46, SE = .06, p < .01$), perceived appropriateness ($\beta = .32, SE = .02, p < .01$), fair treatment of propositions ($\beta = .14, SE = .03, p < .01$), and perceived comprehensibility ($\beta = .09, SE = .03, p < .05$) were positively associated with legitimacy appraisals. H1, H3, H4, and H7 were supported. Results did not support the direct effect of perceived truth on legitimacy ($\beta = .04, SE = .03$). Ability to raise propositions ($\beta = .08, SE = .04$) and symmetrical opportunities ($\beta = -.06, SE = .02$) also had no apparent effect on legitimacy. H2, H5, and H6 were not supported. Smoking status ($\beta = -.11, SE = .03, p < .01$) was the only control variable that had a significant effect on legitimacy. Effects of attitude ($\beta = -.05, SE = .02$) and other demographics were not apparent. The data showed that apart from personal dispositions, respondents were more likely to show support for the government’s action on smoking control if they felt strongly that the government: (a) was sincere in its efforts to protect public health; (b) adopted a normatively appropriate approach to control cigarette use; (c) attended fairly to citizen concerns; and (d) communicated with citizens in an intelligible way. Figure 1
summarizes results of the SEM analysis for hypothesis testing. Nonsignificant paths from the control variables to legitimacy, correlations among exogenous variables, indicators of each latent variable, and error terms were not shown in the diagram for reasons of clarity.

**Discussion**

This article investigates the communicative ground of legitimacy in a hybrid political system, Singapore. Findings indicate that predicated theoretical relationships between perceived communicative conditions and public attributions of legitimacy are partially supported in the studied context. Citizens who agree with government propositions or believe that the government would take their concerns into account are more likely to consider the government worthy of their support, though results vary across validity and speech conditions.

Results from the SEM analysis reveal some underlying communicative reasons that can account for citizen acquiescence to the government’s paternalistic ruling style and identify the unique communicative characteristics of citizen support in a Singapore context. In this study, three validity variables are significant predictors of legitimacy, rather than all four, and their effect sizes vary. Perceived sincerity, perceived appropriateness, and perceived comprehensibility were found to have significant β values. This suggests that citizens are more concerned about whether the government is sincere about its policy goals, executes its decisions appropriately, and explains its action to citizens clearly. Acceptance of these thematized validity claims affects citizen beliefs in the government’s right to rule.

Among the three speech condition variables, only fair treatment of public concerns has an effect on legitimacy in this sample, while neither ability to raise propositions nor symmetrical opportunities are statistically significant. The finding suggests that citizens’ feeling of a responsive government could be more important than that of accessible and symmetrical public discourse in accounting for their normative support for the government. Wong and Huang (2010) note that to improve effective governance political authorities in Singapore appear to welcome constructive criticism to the extent that the core power structure is not challenged. As such, although the government uses more authoritarian practices than liberal democratic countries, it may nevertheless be seen by its citizens as responsive to citizen concerns about general social and economic issues. Our finding of a significant association between perceived fair treatment and citizen support in the setting of smoking control seems to be in line with this argument.

On the other hand, reasons for the nonsignificance of ability to raise propositions and symmetrical opportunities may differ. The significant correlation between citizens’ perceptions of their freedom to raise questions and their legitimacy appraisals found in the zero-order correlation analysis suggests that the nonsignificant effect of ability to raise propositions in the predicted model might be simply due to statistical reasons, such as its covariance with other variables. However, the low mean values
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for symmetrical opportunities and its weak correlation with legitimacy suggest that citizen assessments of different social groups’ equal opportunities to engage in public discourse may be similarly low across the sample, regardless of their high or low legitimacy appraisals. In Singapore the institutional mechanisms allow citizens to express their opinions through online platforms such as reach.gov.sg and through interpersonal channels such as “Meet-the-People” sessions and public hearings. Nevertheless, the government’s interest in practicing meritocracy has also cultivated the value that the elite class knows better than the general public regarding the allocation of political resources (Tan, 2008). The prevalence of such an ideology of inequality and elitism might contribute to the nonsignificant effect of symmetrical opportunities on legitimacy in the tested context.

Although data collected in this study do not support all hypotheses, the different predictability of individual communicative action variables nevertheless is in accordance with the theoretical proposition that certain validity and speech conditions can draw more critical attention from citizens than others, depending on the political system under examination (Habermas, 1979). It further appears that the validity and speech framework might be able to differentiate between legitimization processes in societies where discursive communicative norms are more as compared to less well developed. Legitimacy in democratic settings might be more reliant on communicative speech conditions, while in hybrid political systems, more authoritarian ones, validity conditions would be more important.

Results of this study suggest an approach to testing empirical relationships among validity conditions, speech conditions, and legitimacy within a comparative framework. If nondiscursive and discursive communicative norms and expectations may weigh differently across contexts, then perhaps in some settings citizens’ acceptance of one set of communicative conditions may be sufficient for them to place moral beliefs in a political order. This yields four types of possible relationships between validity and speech condition variables in accounting for legitimacy. In the first situation citizens’ assessments of government validity claims and speech conditions may both be positive, indicating their acceptance of the government’s communicative orientation based on free and full deliberation. Accordingly, legitimacy may stem from mutual understanding with a discursive basis. In the second situation citizens may disagree with government propositions but expect unrestricted dialog between them and the government or among citizens as an opportunity for them to better understand each other’s reasons for supporting or opposing the political authorities. When participants feel that their communication is geared toward gaining reciprocal understanding, they may accept the procedural justice of political control, even if it is not based on a collectively agreed-upon decision. Legitimacy therefore may be attained through action oriented toward increasing mutual understanding. In the third situation citizens may agree with government propositions on a nondiscursive basis, that is, that they may have positive appraisals of government validity claims but conservative assessments of the speech conditions. This could happen when citizens attend more to the substantive fairness of a government. In such circumstances
legitimacy might not originate from a Western sense of democratic deliberation but the political authorities may still gain citizen support based on the public’s general acceptance of government proposals. The Singapore data reported here may appear to fall into this third category. Fourth and finally, if citizens feel negative about both sets of communicative conditions, they may consider the government’s action strategic and not worthy of their support. In such a case legitimacy may be denied.

The categorization presented above certainly oversimplifies citizens’ complex appraisals of individual validity and speech conditions. Nevertheless, it demonstrates that citizens in different systems may evaluate the rightfulness of political authorities in different ways. For example, in a similar smoking policymaking study conducted in the United States, the thematized validity claims are different from those identified in this study (Chang & Jacobson, 2010a). While the Singapore government’s perceived sincerity in using political power to protect public health is the most critical communicative condition in the study reported here, this factor showed no effect in the U.S. study. Instead, the American participants cared more about the political authority’s use of appropriate means to implement smoking policies, resulting in the finding of a predominant effect of perceived appropriateness on citizen support. On the other hand, unlike the appearance of three distinctly different aspects of speech condition assessments in the Singapore context, citizen perceptions of political speech norms were unidimensional in the U.S. study. The mean of perceived speech conditions was positive and the variance was able to account for American participants’ support for the government. Differences observed in the two data sets reflect citizens’ different perceptions of the discursive and nondiscursive communication norms in different political systems. The thematization of different communicative conditions also reveals the unique bond between a government and its citizens regarding the authority’s legitimate right to rule. If more empirical evidence can be found, the validity and speech framework might be useful in guiding investigations of citizen support across varied political systems. More research should explore its applicability in this regard.

Despite this study’s findings, it is important to recognize its limitations. First, the reliability coefficients of perceived sincerity, ability to raise questions, and symmetrical opportunities are lower than expected. For theory testing purposes, these variables stayed in the predicted model and their factor structures were supported by model fit statistics that could not be significantly improved by removing or combining indicators. Past studies indicate that Singaporeans’ general lack of political experience, including the limited experience of serving as opinion poll respondents, may affect their comprehension of political communication-related questions and the consistency of their responses (Lee, Detenber, Willnat, Aday, & Graf, 2004; Zhang & Chia, 2006). This implies that besides the imperfect question design, contextual factors might affect citizens’ consistent responses to the scales as well. Improvements in the research design and measurements adapted to the unique political environment in Singapore are needed. Notwithstanding, the theoretical variables show predictive
power across our national survey and other studies (Chang & Jacobson, 2010a, 2010b; Jacobson & Jun, 2006), suggesting that the results remain worth reporting.

A second limitation regards objects to which legitimacy applies. Political scientists like Easton (1979) note that legitimacy can apply to different objects such as the legality of a political institution, public acceptance of ideological values, and regime support (Levi et al., 2009). In this study the object is a government’s right to rule in the case of smoking control. The selected setting makes it possible for respondents to rate validity and speech condition variables based on their own experiences. However, it is worth considering the extent to which communicative action measures might account for the legitimation of other political objects, such as a regime and its goals and values, the persistence of a system, and political solidarity. For instance, it would be interesting to investigate the general acceptability of different political authorities in the same hybrid political system of Singapore. Would the thematized communicative conditions vary across different types of political control or would the results be similar? The comparison of varied or unvaried results within a system or among systems may provide much information about grounds based on which citizens grant legitimacy to a regime and its underlying ideology. More research can be done to address these issues in the future.

In summary, the communicative action approach presented in this article highlights the bond between procedural judgment and citizen attributions of legitimacy. An index of procedural judgment is developed based on Habermas’s conception of communicative conditions, concentrating on the extent of citizen acceptance of the propositional validity of government statements and on perceived opportunities for uncoerced argumentation. This shifts focus onto the communicative ground of citizen support and supplements the examination of social psychological influences on legitimacy processes studied in much previous research (Jost & Major, 2001; Hechter, 2009). The methodological significance of the validity and speech framework for the cultivation of legitimacy awaits more empirical tests. Key considerations for any such tests include objects to which legitimacy applies, specific roles that individual validity and speech conditions play, comparisons with other sources of legitimacy, and inclusion of other outcomes of fair lawmaking in analyses.

Note

1 Mean values of all communicative action variables were calculated after recoding negative items.

References


Ministry of Health (2010). *Smoking (Control of Advertisements and Sale of Tobacco) Act*.


