

**New Ventures in search for legitimacy? An analysis of startups  
social representations of legitimacy**

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**Introduction**

In many countries, Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) account for more than 95% of all firms not only in developing economies but also in developed economies (Chiao, Yang, & Yu, 2006). This significant weight leads them to play a major role in countries' economies. Recent evolution of the technological environment emphasizes the critical role played by a specific kind of small firms, new ventures, in running the engines of the economy (Schmitz, 1989). Economies with a high proportion of new ventures could be successful in terms of innovation and motivating entrepreneurs to follow their goals (Hmieleski & Baron, 2009; Reinganum, 1985).

A large number of works have been done to find out the mechanisms of new ventures creation, growth and survival (Hanlon & Saunders, 2007; Karlsson & Honig, 2009; Sapienza, Autio, George, & Zahra, 2006). The number of these studies address legitimacy as a crucial resource for new ventures to increase their chance of survival, especially in the first years of their creation (Delmar & Shane, 2004; Dowling & Pfeffer, 1975; Zimmerman & Zeitz, 2002b). More precisely, the lack of legitimacy is the primary characteristic that distinguishes new firms from small firms (LiPuma, 2012). Numerous studies show that firm's legitimacy is necessary to commit to stakeholders, to ease the access to markets, to communicate with various stakeholders and to innovate (Aldrich & Fiol, 1994; David L. Deephouse, Bundy, Tost, & Suchman, 2016; David L. Deephouse & Carter, 2005; Singh Rao, Chandy, & Prabhu, 2008).

Existing articles on legitimacy are mainly focused on big ventures or spin-offs and surprisingly overlooked new ventures with no previous background (e.g. Kostova & Zaheer, 1999; Sahaym, 2013). In this regard, the research on legitimacy among new ventures needs

more severe attempts (Überbacher, 2014; Zimmerman & Zeitz, 2002b). Based on a review of 60 major articles about legitimacy, Überbacher, 2014 concluded that the majority of researchers, applying have applied various perspectives such as institutional theory, population ecology or strategic viewpoint, offered different and even contradictory ways of achieving legitimacy for new ventures. Besides, the premise of these studies is based on the positive aspect of the legitimacy; they all trapped in the one-sided view: the audience.

Literature should now assess diverse representations of various audiences (Golant & Sillince, 2007). This observation is inherent to the definition of the legitimacy : “Organizational legitimacy is the perceived appropriateness of an organization to a social system in terms of rules, values, norms, and definitions” (Deephouse et Suchman, 2017). In other words, a firm is legitimate if it has “valid and plausible representation of [various audiences] interests, values and beliefs” (Golant & Sillince, 2007:1161). Various audiences have been targeted by existent literature, but the representation of the legitimacy by the firm itself had yet not been studied.

This question has partially been raised by Überbacher (2014, p. 684) when he reckons that “future research should [...] more directly studying how different types of audiences actually make legitimacy judgments and resource allocation decisions (because) the stakeholder environments of organizations are increasingly complex and heterogeneous.” Legitimacy is brought by a congruence between two value systems : social values of its own operations and the norms of the social system (Dowling & Pfeffer, 1975). It is therefore inherent to the firm itself and at the core of the new venture creation process (Gaibraith, 1982). However, literature is only focused assessing legitimacy perceived by firms’ audiences, not on the perceptions of startups. This deficiency in venture legitimacy research suggest studying more in depth the legitimacy concept and more specifically the representation of the legitimacy from startup founders. Thus, this research will be dedicated to answer the question: is there an explicit and stable representation of legitimacy by startup founders?

Our preliminary results show that respondents can be ranked in three homogeneous categories of representations.

The first group of respondents represents legitimacy as a consequence of product / service quality. The second group is composed of respondents focusing around communication aspects. These respondents exhibit a voluntary strategy to legitimate their firms through communication. Representations of the last group reflect an acknowledgment, a positive feedback from the audience. Contrary to the two other groups, this group of respondents is

focused on representations of the firm by various audiences.

Contributions are twofold. First, it shows that most respondents focus on a single strategy of legitimacy ignoring its multidimensional dimension. This point suggests that legitimacy is too narrowly perceived and startup founders would benefit from understanding its multidimensional feature. Second, our communication reveals a new dimension of legitimacy that was not clearly identified by past literature: features of the product / service. This major finding suggests updating existing theories to integrate this new mean of legitimacy.

The following communication is articulated around three parts. First a literature review will detail the theoretical framework of this research and the interest to mobilize social representation to study legitimacy. Then, a part will present an original method to assess representation of legitimacy by startup founders based on word evocations. The last part will be focused on presenting our preliminary results and on discussing them.

## **1. Literature review and propositions**

We can trace the legitimacy in studies since 60s from the works of Parson, Weber or other sociologists (Spencer, 1970). Literature on legitimacy knows a regain of interest these years carried by later in the seminal studies of authors such as Suchman (1995), Dowling and Pfeffer (1975), and Kostova & Zaheer (1999). It knows it at its momentum, and about 16 significant studies on this topic have been published in leading management journals since 2010 with nearly thousands of citations. The interesting point is that the focus of these studies is mostly the new ventures. In this regard, the process of legitimation among new ventures is the growing trend among management academicians.

Legitimacy is a resource for new ventures alongside with other resources such as capital, human resource or technology (Zimmerman & Zeitz, 2002b) in a socially constructed system (Suchman, 1995b). It is based on the generalized perception or assumptions that the action in the social system is based on judgment and perception (Bitektine, 2011). Legitimacy is a primary factor that motivates institutions or any other external actors to provide access to the resources they control (Aldrich 2000). It is a prerequisite to convince resource gatekeepers to engage in resource exchanges with it (Starr and MacMillan 1990: 83).

The institutional theorists reckon that it is a survival factor pushing new ventures to allocate resources to enhance their legitimacy (Delmar & Shane, 2004; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). The chance of new venture survival is enhanced by activities by which new ventures appear reliable and accountable in the market.

### **1.1 Dimensions of legitimacy and first proposition**

Talking about legitimacy is about talking the social environment in which the ventures operates. Each venture is operating in a social environment constituted of different segments. These segments are based on the location, the political and regulatory conditions, the industry, the financial or the technological preferences. The conformity to the expectation of the segments make a venture legitimate (D. L. Deephouse, 1996; Kostova & Zaheer, 1999; Ruef & Scott, 1998). Similarly, the environment in which the venture operates lies on the bigger system which is called social system. Although there are wide range of definition for this system, we prefer to see it as an underlying constituent of the environment made up of interrelated parts (Zimmerman & Zeitz, 2002b; Zucker, 1987). The linkage patterns among these parts are shaped by values and norms (Zucker, 1987). A venture tries to make a path between the social values of its own operations and the norms of the social system. The congruence between these two value systems brings legitimacy (Dowling & Pfeffer, 1975) and help new ventures to overcome their liability-of-newness. As a result, these ventures may have more chance of survival (Singh, Tucker, & House, 1986).

Legitimacy is defined by authors from different perspectives such as institutional theory (Oliver, 1991; Suchman, 1995a), resource dependence theory, organizational ecology or even social psychology (Bitektine, 2011; Tost, 2011). This led authors to propose various definitions of legitimacy and to identify several components of legitimacy. The main definitions of legitimacy are presented in table 1.

#### **Insert table 1 here**

Bitektine (2011) proposes that definitions can be categorized into three major groups: the actor's perceptions of the organization; the judgment with respect to the organization (Kostova & Zaheer, 1999); and the behavioral consequences of perception or judgment (Tyler, 1997). Various definitions of legitimacy came along with different dimensions which have been identified by researchers. Table 2 shows the main typologies in the literature.

#### **Insert table 2 here**

Along with the ways that we can view the definition the legitimacy, the authors tried to introduce different types of it. (Zimmerman & Zeitz, 2002) suggest the legitimacy based on respecting to the rules, norms and values, and taken-for-granted assumptions can be categorized into three regulatory, normative and cognitive types. Also, Suchman (1995) categorizes legitimacy based on the self-interested calculations, positive normative evaluations, and taken-for-granted assumptions. (Kostova & Zaheer, 1999) turn our view onto the internal units of the organization. The acceptance of the internal units by other internal

actors and by the organization brings the internal legitimacy to an enterprise. Likewise, the relationships of the organization with external constituents will build the external legitimacy. Given these points, the enterprises are not necessarily present one dimension of the legitimacy at a same time. Based on the evaluating actor/ audience (Bitektine, 2011) in the social system the enterprise should demonstrate different dimension of the legitimacy. So the change in the evaluators cause the change in the dimension of the legitimacy. For instance, Certo (2003) introduce the legitimacy with investors which is the specific type of the legitimacy in contact with financial resources.

*Proposition 1: New ventures exhibit a multidimensional definition of legitimacy*

### **1.2 Legitimacy of New Ventures and second proposition**

New firms suffer from the liability of newness, audience are likely to represent them as less credible, less trustworthy, and less predictable than older firms (LiPuma, 2012; Suchman, 1995b). One of the rational for this is that they don't benefit from a proven “track record” (Stinchcombe, 1965) that would help to lower human, financial, and/or social capital risk endured by stakeholders. New ventures need institutions to provide resources to ensure its growth and survival (Tornikoski and Newbert 2007). For example, as Benzing et al. (2005) found, entrepreneurs struggle to access both short-term and long-term financial capital.

These works suggest that firm should develop a strategy to develop their legitimacy (Zimmerman & Zeitz, 2002a) in order to overcome the liability-of-newness, access other resources and enhance their survival probability. Naturally, researchers identified various strategies to acquire legitimacy. Four strategies have been identified : conformity, manipulation, repairing, and creation (Suchman, 1995a; Zimmerman & Zeitz, 2002b). In table 3 we detail the proposed strategies.

**Insert table 3 here**

Additionally, the main goal of studies in NV legitimation is to find the mechanism of acquiring legitimacy. Fisher, Kuratko, Bloodgood, & Hornsby (2017) studied 70 articles to update the research of Überbacher (2014). They identified three broad categories with various sub-mechanisms which new ventures employed. Storytelling, sensegiving, organizational ties and leader’s background are among the most cited mechanisms. The work of Fisher et al. (2017) raises three issues. First, the problem is that we are not sure of how to tailor each mechanism for the specific situation; the results come from the studies of new ventures in particular situations which are hardly generalizable. Particularly, the legitimation process of INVs and the available mechanisms for them are not fully defined. Second, the relation between these mechanisms and the strategies of achieving legitimacy is not clear. Third, none

of these strategies come from empirical studies, thus we don't know if the firm perceives these strategies.

*Proposition 2: New venture representations reflect the need to acquire legitimacy*

## **2. Method**

### **2.1 Measurement of Organizational Legitimacy**

By reading the articles in the domain of legitimacy and new ventures, the studies can be categorized into three main groups. The first group tries to define the legitimacy. Besides, the researchers in the second group have attempted to answer how organizations gain legitimacy and whether they benefit from it. While scholars focus on the legitimacy and its advantages, there are fewer studies in the third group which tries to find the optimized methods for measuring the organizational legitimacy.

Vergne (2011) describes the different strategies for measuring the legitimacy. In the table 4 we present the main studies in this area with the characteristics of each study. The employed methods for measuring the legitimacy is classified into three main groups. The adoption of ethic codes, the measurement of linkages of the enterprise with internal or external actors and the content analysis.

#### **Insert Table 4**

Legitimacy is engaged with the perception of the evaluators in a social system (Bitektine & Haack, 2015; D. Deephouse, Bundy, Tost, & Suchman, 2017). So the analysis of the press and the media which affect the thoughts of the evaluators, can help the researcher to measure the legitimacy (Vergne, 2011). For instance, newspapers as a public information resource can reflect the public opinion about the venture (D. L. Deephouse & Carter, 2005; Dowling & Pfeffer, 1975). Additionally, the first evaluator of the venture is the management team. As Bitektine & Haack (2015) explain the legitimacy is not the asset owned by the organization, but the thoughts and beliefs of the management team can affect the perception of the other evaluators. In this regard revealing the way the management is looking at the legitimacy, will help us to understand their strategical choices. Our approach discover their choices is the social representation.

### **2.2 Introducing social representation**

Legitimacy, being built from social environment of ventures (Fisher et al., 2017; Überbacher, 2014), shares interesting features with social representations. The following paragraphs detail basic principles of social representation and explicit the interest to measure social representation of legitimacy.

A first approach of social representation was made by Durkheim (1897) while studying the specificities of individual versus collective cognition. Social Representations may be defined as a psychological and social transformation of a reality into a knowledge object (Vigouroux, 2007) at a specific time, for an individual or a group of individual. Social representations emerge from available information of one's environment which are necessarily incomplete (Jodelet, 1991). One partially integrates this incomplete information altered by interpretation of reality enabled by his cognitive system. This phenomenon ultimately ends to produce knowledge reflecting a structured group of cognitive elements (Rouquette, 1994).

These cognitive elements, the representation of a social object, are composed of core and peripheral elements. The core element are a subsystem of the representation composed of one or several elements necessary to ensure the meaning of the representation (Abric, 2003). In other word, removing the core elements of the representation would change the whole meaning of the representation. This definition had later been slightly changed to introduce the idea of core matrix which proposed that core elements of the representation are collective categories of language (Moliner & Martos, 2005a). This amended definition smoothen the definition of core element but doesn't change the structure and the consensual dimension of representation (Moliner & Martos, 2005b).

In addition to the most consensual elements of the representation, peripheral elements include particularities of the representations which shape the representation according to individual experiences and various groups of belonging (Campos, 2008). These peripheral elements are tied together by the organizing function of the core elements: the fit between core and peripheral elements ensure the stability of the representation (Abric, 2003).

### **2.3 Measuring social representation**

First method to identify social representations is to conduct qualitative interviews. It consist of asking respondents to give their definition of legitimacy and to identify traces of social representations. This enables to have a holistic view of social representations. On the other side, quantitative data collection reduces the meaning of the social representations whereas it enables generalizability of results. Numerous methods were developed by socio-psychologist to assess social representations (Junique, Scano, & Vergès, 2005; Moliner, 2002).

« Likert » scale (respondents must give their degree of agreement with a list of items),

« Osgood » questionnaire (respondents must position on a scale composed of two opposed items),

Grouping questionnaire (respondents must associate words from a predefined list),

Connection questionnaire (respondents must link words that are connected),

Choice questionnaire (respondents must choose causes of a phenomenon from a predefined list),

Characterization questionnaire (respondents must rank most important causes of a phenomenon from a predefined list, and rank those that are not linked),

Most of the above techniques (such as « Osgood » or « Likert » scale) have numerous interesting characteristics (quick to fill, easiness of data analysis ...). However, these techniques require identifying numerous items that may constraint results. Given that no prior study of social representations of legitimacy of startup founders exist and the exploratory dimension of this research we decided to use the questionnaire free evocation questionnaire. This technique consists of asking respondents to write 5 words or expression that come to their mind while they think about legitimacy. Free evocation questionnaire enable to plot similitudes tree that are really common to study social representation (Degenne & Vergès, 1973; Degenne, 1985; Flament, 1962; Moliner, 2002). Also, the simplicity of the questionnaire make it really easy to duplicate to other language to perform an international comparison (Campos, 2008; Poeschl, 2008; Viaud, 2008).

#### **2.4 Design of data analysis**

The first step to establish social representations of legitimacy is to create categories from words evoked by respondents. Each category must contain synonymous or words with the same root. Therefore each category reflect one dimension (or one meaning) of the representation.

From these categories, it is then possible to draw a co-occurrence figure. This kind of figure may be plotted with dedicated software such as “Avril” which produce a representation of the links between concepts evoked by respondents. Each association is represented by an edge. Associations are summed for all respondents to produce representation of the whole sample. This graph is very useful to identify visually central elements of the representation. These are the elements which share the most edges with numerous categories.

The figure 3 presents an example of a co-occurrence figure. The thickness of the link between two categories reflect the strength of the association. Category 3 shares the most numerous edge with other categories evoked. Therefore it can be considered as a central element of the social representations (Vergès & Bouriche, 2001). However we can't name category 3 as core of the representation as Moliner (2002) reconsideration questionnaire had not been used to

test core elements of the representation.

**Insert figure 3 here**

## **2.5 Sample**

This research project aims to assess representations of French startups founders. The data collection has just started and produces some very interesting results presented underneath. We expect to collect about 100 questionnaires from incubators of PACA region.

## **3. Preliminary results and discussion**

We start this part by presenting our preliminary results. They show a reduced number of typologies of social representations of legitimacy. There are three distinct categories, with strong individual convergences. In other words, all the evocations of each respondent are very coherent.

A first group of startups have representation of legitimacy oriented around the features of the **product or service**. This representation called “product” refers to the specific competencies that the startups own to provide their product, goods or services. The terms used by respondents are “*expertise*”, “*know how*”, “*essential*”, “*experience*”, “*competencies*”, “*product*”. This association between legitimacy and product goes in the direction of Becker-Blease and Sohl (2015). The authors consider that ventures in with unproven products and markets are typically viewed as less legitimate. So this respondents focus on the know how to acquire legitimacy maybe more than on the how know. This findings can be explained by the new ventures characteristics Indeed, new venture are often known for lack of resources what Stinchcombe, (1965) called “liability of newness”. This implies that the creation and development of a new venture takes a lot of time and requires a quick learning of many skills (business development, marketing, communication, specific language to investors). They can not do everything at the same time and they must make choices. The only element they can control is their product or services. So one key to the success of these companies is to specialize and therefore focus on developing their product. They base their legitimacy on their competence and their ability to offer products with a high level of quality. The business is legitimate because it is in line with what stakeholders expected of it. This first group is oriented to the answer to the question : “how to be legitimate?”.

A second group startups have representations reflecting a perception oriented around the “**communication**”. The terms used by respondents with this type of representations are “*charisma*”, “*attraction*”, “*to convince*”, “*to convince effortlessly*”. Some respondents are

sensitive to the power of legitimacy to convince stakeholders. The constraint of the new venture is always the same, the lack of resources. It uses legitimacy as a tool to communicate and attract new partners. This representation presents the legitimacy as an influence process. This second group is oriented to the answer to the question : “How can I use legitimacy?” from a proactive perspective.

The last group of startups have representations reflecting a perception oriented around the “**recognition**”. It is also a group focused on the issue : “what I do that can be legitimized?” from a reactive perspective. The terms used by respondents with this type of representations are “*recognition*”, “*confidence*”, “*identity*”, “*accepted*”. It is also by associating with partners already known and renowned that it can benefit from a transfer of their brand image and become legitimate. Belonging to a network or a label are sources of recognition by expert and external partners in specific fields (innovation for BPI in France for example). Deeds et al., (1997) suggest that the network of a new venture, particularly with existing organizations, can contribute to the new venture’s legitimacy. Zimmerman and Zeitz (2002) specifically point to networks with auditors, banks and corporate boards as good sources of normative legitimacy. This refers to the idea of identity of the new venture. To be legitimate is indeed to be able to answer the question: in the name of what do you act ?, that is, to satisfy the constraint of social justification. Identity is the answer to the question: who are we? And is therefore a matter of rationalization and individual justification. If legitimacy corresponds to the new venture’s report and its environment, identity corresponds to the definition of the new venture boundaries.

The results we have just described, lead us to conclude on our contributions and answering to the question : is there an explicit and stable representation of legitimacy by startup founders? First, it is surprising if we consider legitimacy as a vital resource for firms to develop (Becker-Blease and Sohl, 2015) to show that respondents perceive legitimacy in only one way and ignore the multidimensionality of the concept. However as suggest by Adler and Kwon (2002, 33) « *the success of organizations depends on their ability to master not only their technical activities, but also the symbolic challenge of creating and maintaining their legitimacy.*” It would be interesting from a managerial point of view to pursue our research on the impact of different representations of legitimacy on the success of new venture. Second, we observe a new way to represent legitimacy. The concept of legitimacy takes its origins in law. Legitimacy is initially defined as compliance with rules and laws. It is interesting to note that we have no group that represents legitimacy as in this perspective but on contrary we observe a new way to perceive legitimacy around features of the product/service. This major

finding suggests to pursue the research to updating existing literature on legitimacy and new venture.

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## 5. Tables

Reference	Definition	Scope Bitektine, 2011
Spencer, 1970	Parsons: <i>“Appraisal of action in terms of shared or common values in the context of the involvement of the action in the social system”</i>	Judgment
Spencer, 1970	Weber: <i>“A legitimate order is meant a normative system which is upheld by the belief in the actors of its binding quality or rightness. “</i>	Perception
Dowling & Pfeffer, 1975	Maurer: <i>“Legitimation is the process where by an organization justifies to a peer or superordinate system its right to exist, that is to continue to import, transform, and export energy, material, or information”</i>	Judgment
Dowling & Pfeffer, 1975	<i>Implied congruence with the cultural environment, with “the norms of acceptable behaviour in the larger social system”</i>	Judgment/ Behavioural consequences (acceptance)
Kostova & Zaheer, 1999	Meyer and Scott: <i>“The degree of cultural support for an organization - the extent to which the array of established cultural accounts provides explanations for its existence, functioning, and jurisdiction, and lack or deny alternatives”</i>	Judgment
Oliver, 1991	<i>Social fitness</i>	Judgment
Suchman, 1995a	<i>Legitimacy is a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable,</i>	Perception/ Judgment

	<i>proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions</i>	
Tyler, 1997	<i>The belief that authorities are entitled to be obeyed</i>	Behavioural consequences (endorsement)
Kostova & Zaheer, 1999	<i>Acceptance of the organization by its environment</i>	Behavioural consequences (acceptance)
Tost, 2011	<i>subjective perceptions of the fairness or justice of the distribution of socially distributed outcomes</i>	Perception/ Behavioural consequences (acceptance)
Zimmerman & Zeitz, 2002b	<i>Legitimacy is a social judgment of appropriateness, acceptance, and desirability</i>	Judgment
Washington & Zajac, 2005	<i>Legitimacy refers to the level of social acceptability bestowed upon a set of activities or actors</i>	Judgment/ Behavioural consequences (acceptance)
Rindova, Pollock, & Hayward, 2006	<i>The degree to which broader public's view a company's activities as socially acceptable and desirable because its practices comply with industry norms and broader societal expectations</i>	Perception/ Judgment

Table 1 – Legitimacy Definitions

Author	Types
Zimmerman & Zeitz, 2002b	Socio-political regulatory Socio-political normative Cognitive
Suchman, 1995a	Pragmatic Moral <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Consequential (based on accomplishments)</li> <li>○ Procedural (based on socially accepted procedures)</li> <li>○ Structural (based on evaluation of organization's structure)</li> <li>○ Personal (based on charisma of leaders)</li> </ul> Cognitive
Kostova & Zaheer, 1999	Internal External
Singh Rao et al., 2008	Internal (based on market, scientific, historical and locational evaluations) External (Through making networks with alliances)

Table 2 – Legitimacy Typology

<b>Reference</b>	<b>Strategy</b>
Suchman, 1995a	<p><b>Gain</b> (Conformity)</p> <p><b>Maintain</b> (Perceive changes – Frequent Monitoring)</p> <p><b>Repair</b> (Normalization - Restructure)</p>
Zimmerman & Zeitz, 2002b	<p><b>Conformance</b> (following the rules)</p> <p><b>Selection</b> (locating in the favourable location)</p> <p><b>Manipulation</b> (innovation and/or substantial departure from the prior practice)</p> <p><b>Creation</b> (creation of social context, rules, norms, values etc.)</p>

Table 3 – Legitimacy strategies

<b>Reference</b>	<b>Case study</b>	<b>Measurement Category</b> Vergne, 2011	<b>Mechanism</b> Fisher et al., 2017
Elsbach, 1994	California Cattle Industry	Experimental	Identity Mechanisms – Impression Management
Ruef & Scott, 1998	Hospital	Linkage Measurement	Organizational Mechanisms
Massey, 2001	Airline Industry	Content Analysis	Identity mechanisms - Impression Management
David L. Deephouse & Carter, 2005	Financial Sector - bank	Content Analysis	Identity mechanisms
Vergne, 2011	Defense industry	Content Analysis	

Table 4 – Measurement of legitimacy

	Category		
Evocation	1	2	3
A- - - -	X		
B- - - -		X	
C- - - -			X

Table 5 – Ranking of categories

**6. Figures**

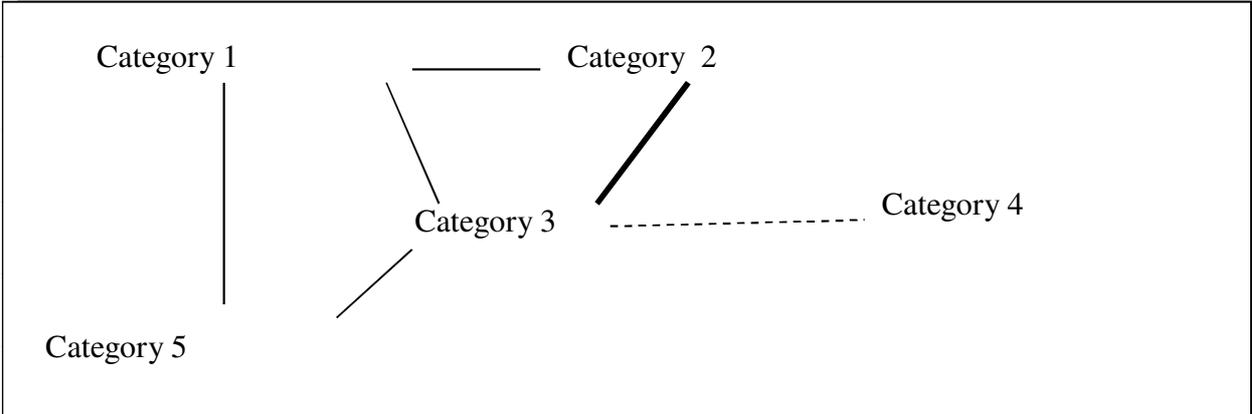


Figure 1 – Example of co-occurrence graph