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WHAT'S IN A NAME? GIVING FORM AND MEANING TO A NEW CULINARY CATEGORY

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INTRODUCTION

When an innovation occurs in an art world, new practices, materials, and conventions are introduced, which generate ambiguous stimuli and potentially upset the established order (Becker, 1982). To discipline the emerging new order, social actors resort to categories which provide classification systems and confer stability by orienting meanings in a legitimate direction, defining rules of inclusion, and bestowing identity (Curchod, Patriotta & Neysen, 2014; Di Maggio, 1987; Negro, Koçak & Hsu, 2010; Rao, Monin & Durand, 2005). Labels given to categories confer a name to emerging phenomena (Negro, Hannan & Rao, 2011) and a category exists whenever the same label is used for different actors or objects in a field (Curchod et al. 2014).

The process of categorization and labeling, however, involves negotiations among a plurality of social actors with different interests, preferences, and professional biases (Grandqvist, Grodal & Woolley, 2013; Jones et al., 2012). For example, the plurality of actors involved in the stabilization of an innovation into a recognizable style tend to use language that reflects their respective domains of expertise and agendas, which might lead to problems of misinterpretation of the innovators' efforts or mislabeling. Therefore, far from recreating order, the process of categorization and labeling may generate controversies over meaning and competition among multiple labels of a category. In this situation of temporary "disorder", it becomes difficult for the innovators to promote their agenda and to create consensus around a label.

During the process of negotiation of meaning around an emerging category, relevant actors use and mobilize discourse, materials and visual representations to articulate the category, make sense of it and give sense to target audiences (Jones, Boxenbaum & Anthony, 2013; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2011; Meyer et al, 2013). While the material and the visual have received growing interest in recent years (Jones & Massa, 2013; Jones et al., 2012; Meyer et al., 2013), further research is needed on their relationship with labeling, meaning making, and the controversies surrounding a new style's emergence and legitimation. In this study we examine how a new category gets developed and defined in the presence of competing labels and complementary modes of representation.

We investigate the ongoing controversies around the labeling of an emerging avant-garde style of cooking denoted as molecular gastronomy, modernist cuisine, progressive, techno-emotional, multi-sensory or science-based cooking. Taken together, these labels indicate a lack of agreement on the meaning and categorization of this emergent style. Our focus is on four emblematic chefs associated with it: Ferran Adrià, Grant Achatz, Heston

Blumenthal, and Massimo Bottura and on their efforts to engage with attempts of others to label their new style. We find that category formation consists of three sub-processes: creation, contestation and consolidation that over time and through recursive negotiations help move the category forward.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

A vast stream of research has considered categorization as a cognitive process that addresses uncertainty and ambiguity around emergent entities (Curchod et al., 2014; Durand & Paoella, 2013; Rosa et al., 1999). Other scholars have emphasized the socio-cultural contexts in which categories are embedded, revealing influences of macro forces on categorization processes (Glynn & Navis 2013; Rindova, Dalpiaz & Ravasi, 2011). Taken together, these perspectives illuminate how the ambiguity and uncertainty related to emerging innovations are addressed cognitively as well as institutionally. However, categorization also reflects the conflicting interests of the social actors involved, which are often accompanied by competing labels. This political element of categorization can be described through the concept of the ‘politics of meaning’ (Geertz 1972), that is, the framing and representation of the category (labeling), as well as the settlement of controversies around its sense (Patriotta & Spedale, 2009). This notion refers to the meaning of words and things more than the immediate ‘political’ interests of the parties involved. When applied to categorization, politics of meaning provides a productive device for understanding new category formation as a contested process, which involves the mobilization of discourse that reflects social actors’ different agendas.

In making sense of a new category, however, social actors mobilize not only discourses but also material artifacts and their visual representations (Groleau & Demers, 2012; Jones & Massa, 2013). Videos, photographs, sketches, texts, websites, logos, and other objects, provide the material base and semiotic code of a category and act as ‘spokespersons’ representing the category symbolically, supporting processes of theorization and legitimation. While attention to the role of discourse and material artifacts in categories’ formation has been explored in recent years (Carlile et al., 2013; Jones et al., 2012), research on categories has so far underplayed the political dynamics inherent in the relationship among labeling, meaning, and materiality, in connection to the innovators’ efforts to develop and diffuse a new style. In the remainder of this paper, we consider the contested categorization of an emergent avant-garde culinary style, which is denoted with different labels and involves distinctive use of discourse, materiality and visual representations for category meaning making.

METHODS

We focus on the creators of the new style and primary sensegivers (the chefs) by documenting how their efforts of creation and theorization encounter resistance and are modified along the way. We zoom in on four emblematic chefs, considered among the world’s best and referred to as representative of the new style to understand how the emergence of a new category unfolds and how meaning is constructed and diffused over time. Data were collected during the period 1995-2015 as part of different research projects on individual chefs. The chosen timeline reflects the period in which this culinary style was under development. Data collection relied on three main sources: interviews, textual and visual artifacts, and observations. We conducted in-depth interviews with the chefs, their collaborators and central actors in the process of labeling the emergent culinary category. We also collected chefs’ sketches, photographs, videos and books and attended conferences and

international forums at which chefs, food writers, and scientists collaborated in advancing the new style. Furthermore, we looked at the media coverage of the new culinary style by using Factiva database, a leading source for press articles and business news. We performed searches with the key words “molecular gastronomy” and a variety of competing and complementary labels, read through these articles and systematically coded the data to trace the emergence and salience of different labels. Finally, we did participant observations at Adrià’s research lab and business innovation workshop, to see how the chef developed new recipes and used diagrams to give and make sense of the ongoing creation process.

Since our focus was on how actors convey and negotiate meanings, we followed a semiotic approach to data analysis (Barley, 1983). That is, elements of discourse, artifacts, and visuals were treated as one dataset and they were conceived as ‘signs’ that point to broader social realities and convey distinctive meanings. The dataset was analyzed for main themes related to the content, form, and meaning of the new style as well as the ways in which it was being labeled, visualized, and materialized by its creators and different audiences.

FINDINGS

Our analysis revealed three sub-processes that concurrently drive the form and meaning of the new culinary category: creation, contestation and consolidation. These processes include a plurality of actors (e.g. chefs, journalists, critics, scientists) and are associated with different practices, as well as discursive, material, and visual representations.

1) *Creation*. This process entails the development and theorization of new products and practices performed by innovators. Our analysis reveals that, despite the uniqueness of their respective signature styles, the chefs shared a systematic approach to creation and the use of multiple artifacts in the theorization and codification of their work. Their articulation of meaning is based on drawings, sketches, pictures and notes about experiments and dishes, conveying the aesthetics, values and conventions associated with the new style. These artifacts act not simply as functional objects, but as symbolic and political agents able to effectively create and convey the new style’s meaning. They are used to organize new knowledge and to make it accessible to relevant audiences. For example, in the span of over two decades, Adrià completed hundreds of notebooks with ideas, photographs, and “conceptual maps” for elBulli, which sought to synthesize, conceptualize, and preserve the particularities of his new culinary approach. In the early 2000s, the chef also introduced the use of prototypes in the form of plasticine models to simulate the exact shape and colors of his dishes.

2) *Contestation*. This sub-process involves the negotiation of meaning emerging from potential misinterpretation or mislabeling of the new category. In order to make sense of the emerging innovation, food journalists, experts and critics initiated a process of interpreting the chefs’ work and labeling the emerging culinary category. In that, they used the label “molecular gastronomy”, a name that emphasized the image of science present in the chefs’ work. The semantic field of the molecular label evoked images of science in the kitchen, the kitchen as a lab, the use of precision instruments, and the molecular deconstruction of recipes. The media’s initial efforts to label the new style “molecular gastronomy” were met by the chefs’ rejection of what they considered a misnomer. In interviews, self-produced videos, and presentations at public events chefs stood in fierce opposition to the term, as they felt that the label “molecular gastronomy” neglected issues of sensorial experience, emotions, tradition and artistic achievement that were central to their work. In order to preserve the complexity and artistic connotation of the new culinary style, the chefs advanced their own labels. Adrià suggested the label “new nouvelle cuisine”, a term that reveals his intention to

emphasize the aesthetic dimension of nouvelle cuisine while indicating a departure from existing canons. Blumenthal chose the label “multi-sensory”, to emphasize the role that smells, sounds, memories and emotions had in his culinary approach. Furthermore, Achatz opted to describe his cuisine as “progressive American”, because “*We are trying to use all the tools available to the modern chef and create an experience that is evocative*” (The Huffington Post, 2012). Finally, Bottura described his cooking as “*Traditional seen from ten miles away*” (website restaurant Osteria Francescana). That is, a cuisine that uses new instruments and techniques as a medium for innovating while promoting and sustaining the evolution of his country’s food.

Despite the chefs’ attempts to gain recognition of their distinctive approaches and to promote labels that they considered more appropriate, terms like “techno-emotional” or “progressive” were not picked up by the media, which continued using the term “molecular gastronomy.” The term became sticky and gained publicity through its increasing presence in the international press. Due to its nature and outreach, media had the power to diffuse the label “molecular gastronomy” much wider and faster than the other actors. This might be explained by the fact that molecular gastronomy reflected the most visible – the science-related equipment and techniques, as well as culinary practices based on scientific transformation – allowing materials to perform beyond what the chefs had expected them to do. Materials took center-stage as powerful representatives of the new style, at the expense of its more ephemeral aspect associated with aesthetics.

The analysis of the debate around the definition of the new style and category shows that a plurality of different actors negotiates meanings by ongoing waves of sensemaking and sensegiving processes. These processes, in turn, emerge from the purposeful action of chefs to create and mobilize a new culinary style. Meanings codified by creators are received by audiences in ways that might be different from what they intended. As a result, discrepancies emerge, which lead creators to leverage more spokespersons (texts, material and visual artifacts) that can communicate on their behalf. This is a back and forth movement between innovators and audiences of coding, decoding and innovators’ need of further articulation of their work, that encourage category stabilization.

3) *Consolidation.* The consolidation of a style’s characteristics occurs when new meanings are disseminated by its creators to public arenas and anchored to well established and legitimate institutions, as well as when innovators’ work receives recognition in the most important rankings and field-configuring events. In this process, artifacts represent ways to achieve consolidation as they embody and crystallize meanings, thereby helping innovators gain recognition for their work. To anchor the meaning of the emerging style to their proclaimed beliefs and principles, from 2007 to 2015 the chefs’ progressively transferred their artifacts, which used to be mainly located in private domains (such as the chefs’ kitchens or creativity workshops), to public spaces to make them widely accessible. This transfer involved the spatial displacement of the chefs’ tools, sketches, diagrams and videos to established institutions such as universities, museums and galleries, and at field-configuring events, such as gastronomy conferences, festivals, and fairs, which signals their efforts to confirm the new style’s status with both the worlds of science and art.

Being the leader of the new style, for instance, Adrià was the first chef to participate in the documenta Kassel, an international contemporary art exhibition, as an artist in 2007. Later, his equipment, diagrams, photos, videos and prototypes were displayed in public art exhibitions such as “Ferran Adrià: risk, freedom and creativity” (at Palau Robert, Barcelona, 2012), the first one of a chef’s “oeuvre” to take place in an exhibition hall, or “Ferran Adrià: Notes on creativity” at the Drawing Centre in New York City to display all the diagrams and sketches that had oriented his creative processes. Furthermore, Adrià, Achatz, Blumenthal and Bottura became active participants in gastronomy conferences such as Madrid Fusión,

Gastronomika and Mad Symposium. These events allowed them not only to explain how their individual approaches contributed to the identity of the new style but also to gain recognition as its main representatives. In 2010, furthermore, Adrià engaged in a public lecture series at Harvard University titled “Science and Cooking”. Having chefs as instructors in prestigious Universities is another evidence not only of their consolidation efforts to crystallize the appropriate meaning of the new culinary style, but also of the public recognition that the style was receiving by different audiences.

Overall, the different initiatives undertaken by the chefs reveal their efforts to gain legitimacy and to institutionalize their novel approach to cooking by building connections with established actors and institutions both within and outside the culinary field. Indeed, the chefs’ creative efforts were recognized by the world’s most influential gastronomic institutions. For instance, since 2010, these chefs’ restaurants always appeared in the top 20 of the San Pellegrino ranking (a competitor to the Guide Michelin) and have all been awarded three Michelin stars. These awards showed that, despite numerous appellations and controversies, the new style had gained recognition (neither classic French nor nouvelle cuisine restaurants reached top positions in the San Pellegrino ranking in recent years). Yet, while these recognitions might suggest the stabilization of the new style, they do not lead to closure. Rather, we suggest that consolidation constitutes a way station on the road to a consensually constructed label/category. The categorization process remains open. Consolidation fuels further efforts at creation/theorization and further rounds of contestation. Overall, in each cycle, new signs are leveraged, or the same signs are used in a different context and with a different purpose, leading to new meanings and to a new state of consolidation of the style.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The objective of this study was to examine how a new category, and the style it represents, gets developed in the presence of multiple competing labels and through complementary modes of representation. It shed light on the political dynamics underlying the social construction of an emerging category, and paving the way to its consolidation. The social construction of the category unfolds along three (connected) processes: creation, contestation and consolidation. Our findings suggest that label and content can be in opposition and still bring a new category forward. The media plays a major role in popularizing the label “molecular gastronomy” as it resonates more strongly with the audience than the emotional, aesthetic, and ideological concerns expressed by the chefs themselves. On the other hand, the label sticks also because it points to a powerful, highly legitimized myth of science, which provides the rationale, and the discursive and material resources underpinning the labeling of the new phenomenon. Therefore, “mislabeling” (i.e. labeling by audiences in disagreement with the original creators) is not necessarily something negative for a new style: stabilization can be pushed forward through disagreement.

This study contributes first to literature on categories in emphasizing the dynamics of labeling surrounding processes of category construction. It shows that category construction also involves the “politics of meaning”, that takes place through recurrent processes of creation/contestation/consolidation, in which innovators and media as their “mirror” shape and address the new style, pursuing their agendas and interests. The study also contributes to existing research by highlighting the role that materiality, in addition to discourse, plays in the controversy around and in the crystallization of meaning.

REFERENCES AVAILABLE FROM THE AUTHORS

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