

# From Confusion to Fusion: A New Organizational Form and the Evaluation of Category Spanning in an Established Form

Can the rise of gourmet food trucks shift how diners value fusion in brick-and-mortar restaurants, and under what conditions will established-restaurants benefit from this category-spanning trend?

Todd Schifeling and colleagues investigate how the emergence of gourmet food trucks alters diner perceptions of brick-and-mortar restaurants that offer a wide array of fusion dishes. Initially, the authors conducted in-depth interviews with food truck owners and analyzed Yelp reviews to discern how these mobile vendors frame their menus, emphasizing innovative combinations of culinary backgrounds. Next, they compiled annual counts of gourmet food trucks operating in seven major U.S. metropolitan areas between 2005 and 2014. These figures were then matched with Yelp ratings and detailed cuisine-category information for 34,727 brick-and-mortar restaurants in the same regions. The key independent variable, spanning, quantifies the number and diversity of cuisine types a restaurant features.

To assess the impact of gourmet food truck prevalence on restaurant evaluations, the authors employ a panel random-effects Tobit model. The dependent variable is the restaurant's Yelp rating, while controls include review volume, reviewer engagement, restaurant age, price tier, city-level demographic characteristics, and year fixed effects. The findings demonstrate that as the density of gourmet food trucks rises, diners award significantly higher ratings to restaurants with greater spanning. This suggests that exposure to innovative food truck offerings reshapes evaluative criteria, making fusion-oriented menus more appealing to consumers.

To validate that the observed association stems from causal exposure rather than omitted variables, the authors conducted a preregistered vignette experiment. Participants exposed to a narrative describing a fusion-focused food truck scenario assigned higher evaluations to hypothetical restaurants with diverse menus, compared to a control group. Collectively, the evidence indicates that gourmet food trucks, as a novel outsider form, introduce alternative value constructs that spill over to established restaurants willing to embrace category-spanning strategies.

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## MAJOR TAKEAWAYS:

- As gourmet food trucks proliferate, diners learn to appreciate fusion, and category-spanning restaurants receive higher Yelp ratings.
- New outsider forms can introduce alternative value theories, causing varied spillover that benefits established restaurants aligned with fusion ideals.
- Experimental evidence confirms that exposure to a fusion-focused truck scenario increases diners' willingness to reward spanning in brick-and-mortar sites.

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## WHO NEEDS TO KNOW:

- Restaurant Owners
- Food Trend Experts
- Markets

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