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GIADA DI STEFANO
SAVERIO D. FAVARON

Organizational Reactions to Expert and Consumer Evaluations in Haute Cuisine

In the world of haute cuisine, intermediaries have the power to make or break the fate of restaurants. Through a multimethod analysis, this research explores how these businesses react to online reviews as well as the introduction of new rankings (in this case, the Michelin Guide). The results show that restaurants' responses are strategic, often more symbolic than substantive, aimed at meeting public expectations without compromising long-term goals. The studies reveal how status generates relevant reputational pressures, and how organizational reactions are influenced by the visibility, tone, and content of the reviews in question.

BRAND POSITIONING//REPUTATION MANAGEMENT//STRATEGIC MARKETING//HIGH CATERING

GIADA DI STEFANO
is Full Professor of Strategy at Bocconi University and serves as Director of the DBA program in SDA Bocconi.

SAVERIO D. FAVARON
is Assistant Professor of Strategy at the KTO (Knowledge, Technology and Organization) research center of SKEMA Business School (France).

In market contexts where there are numerous producers, and when it is objectively difficult to assess the quality of suppliers (Fleischer, 2009), consumers tend to rely on the judgment of third-party evaluators to guide their purchasing decisions (Caves, 2000; Hsu, 2006; Huhn, Bourdieu and Johnson, 1993; Rao, Monin and Durand, 2005). The evaluator's role is twofold: on the one hand, they gather information about producers and disseminate it to the consuming public; on the other hand, they establish value hierarchies among producers through classifications and comparisons.

Status, understood as the relative position occupied by an actor within a social hierarchy (Podolny, 1993; Piazza and Castellucci, 2014), is largely shaped by these intermediaries. Their valuations carry tremendous weight in terms of producers' access to strategic resources, their market performance, and ultimately their likelihood of survival (Rao, Monin, and Durand, 2005; Sauder, 2006). Firms with high status can enjoy multiple competitive advantages: the freedom to charge premium prices while incurring lower operating costs, and the ability to obtain disproportionate benefits relative to competitors (Goode, 1978; Cole and Singer, 1991; Podolny, 1993; Benjamin and Podolny, 1999; Gould, 2002; Simcoe and Waguespack, 2011; Sauder, Lynn, and Podolny, 2012). The asymmetric allocation of such benefits, mediated by evaluators selecting and promoting certain producers at the expense of others, has attracted wide interest in the academic literature. This strand of scholarship highlights the transformative power of intermediaries, whose position at the crossroads of production and consumption allows them to profoundly affect the configuration of markets.

In recent years, however, this scenario has undergone a profound transformation. In the past, intermediaries were generally seen as experts with in-depth industry expertise (such as film and food and wine critics, financial analysts, or health inspectors), whose assessments influenced consumer choices. The advent of digital technologies has fostered the rise of a new type of intermediary: online platforms that allow consumers themselves to make public judgments about producers and their products (e.g., TripAdvisor, IMDb, Google Reviews). With the proliferation of these platforms and the exponential rise in user-generated reviews across a plurality of industries (Dellarocas, 2003; Fourcade and Healy, 2017; Olson and Waguespack, 2020; Botelho, 2024), it now seems clear that these comments exert major influence on the behavior of companies. Consumer reviews are now a structural element of the current evaluation environment.

Against this increasingly complex backdrop, our work examines how organizations interact with different types of audiences in an attempt to assert their position in markets populated by intermediaries. Our investigation develops around two main questions. The first concerns how organizations react to evaluations from traditional intermediaries, particularly in cases where a new status hierarchy is introduced (Favaron, Di Stefano and Durand, 2022). The second has to do with how organizations react to evaluations expressed by consumers in online reviews, with a specific focus on consistency between public statements they make in response to these reviews and actions they actually implement from an operational standpoint (Favaron and Di Stefano, 2025).

The analysis was conducted in the empirical context of fine dining, a well-established and relevant field for organizational studies (Rao, Monin, and Durand, 2003, 2005; Demetry, 2013; Di Stefano, King, and Verona, 2014, 2015; Kovács and Johnson, 2014). At the methodological level, we use experimental and quasi-experimental data, collected through a multimodal approach that integrates large, manually constructed datasets (related to restaurant menus and online reviews) with the results of a survey conducted with French chefs, plus multiple rounds of interviews with owners and chefs at high-end restaurants. The following is a summary of the main results that emerged with respect to the two research questions, accompanied by a description of the methods we used to develop them.

REACTION TO EXPERT EVALUATION

Our investigation started from understanding, what happens when a new status hierarchy is introduced. But first, we'll take a step back to look at the traditional perspective, in which status is considered a relatively stable attribute that offers protection from criticism and reduces the likelihood of punitive evaluations. In this view, actors who achieve a sudden rise in their status hierarchy would have little incentive to adopt behaviors aimed at reaffirming their value.

More recent interpretations, however, paint a more complex picture: the sudden attainment of high status can generate feelings of vulnerability, causing actors to justify and defend their newly obtained position (Correll et al. 2017; Hahl, Zuckerman, and Kim, 2017; Wang and Jensen, 2019). Slotting into the theoretical strand that interprets rankings as "insecurity generators," the present study hypothesizes that actors who obtain high status *ex-novo* tend to change the way they present themselves to align with what they believe to be the public's expectations of the elite set they now belong to. An additional hypothesis is that organizations already endowed with prestige prior to the introduction of the new ranking feel less pressure to reaffirm their status (Kim and Jensen, 2011; Durand and Kremp, 2016). Thanks to this pre-existing legitimacy, they would be less motivated to change the way they present themselves.

A unique opportunity to test these hypotheses arose on 31 May 2016, when the editor of the Michelin Guide announced the release of the first edition dedicated to Washington, DC, scheduled for the fall of that year. This announcement sent tremors through the U.S. capital's fine dining scene. Indeed, the Guide is arguably the world's most prestigious food critic, and Washington DC would become only the fourth US city covered by the guide, along with New York, San Francisco and Chicago. According to official statements, the publication would help "strengthen the city's position on the world stage of great dining destinations." Press interviews by renowned chefs and the authors' conversations with food critics and restaurant managers in the weeks following the announcement largely confirmed these expectations. As stated by the manager of a city restaurant, "It's a relevant standard for dining, and the fact that DC is included for the first time is a major event."

The publication of the first edition of a guide of such influence offered a unique opportunity to observe the changes enacted by restaurants that were included in it compared to those of equal standing excluded from the selection, adopting an analysis strategy called *difference-in-differences*. To this end, two lists of comparable restaurants were compiled: the first consisting of establishments located in Washington DC but not appearing in the guide, and the second of similar restaurants based in Boston, a comparable city not yet reviewed by the Michelin Guide at the time of the analysis. This empirical strategy made it possible to isolate more precisely the effect of the "status shock" produced by the introduction of a new evaluative hierarchy. The quantitative analysis was also complemented by an in-depth examination of qualitative data on restaurants' reactions to the announcement of the new ranking.

The results of the analysis indicate that restaurants affected by this status leap responded by acting on three key dimensions of their self-presentation. First, they reformulated the narrative elements of their menus to align more consistently with elite cultural norms. Second, they placed greater emphasis on culinary techniques and ingredients as a signal of authenticity, a distinctive attribute of high-end establishments. Third, they modified their pricing strategies to communicate awareness of the value they offer and to demonstrate their ability to capitalize on this value with their customers.

However, important to note is that the patterns of response to a rise in status are not homogeneous. Although all the restaurants acted on these three dimensions, the intensity of the response was most pronounced among establishments that, although listed in the Guide, were not placed at the top of the new hierarchy, i.e., those that did not obtain a Michelin star. Quite unexpectedly, even restaurants that already enjoyed excellent reputations (which, in theory, should have felt less need to demonstrate their value) made noticeable changes, with particular emphasis on the elements of authenticity and value. These dynamics appear consistent with the theories described by Hahl and colleagues (Hahl and Zuckerman, 2014; Hahl, Zuckerman, and Kim, 2017), highlighting the reputational risks and symbolic pressures faced by high-profile actors who are potentially exposed to forms of scrutiny or denigration. This suggests that gaining Michelin recognition can trigger concrete operational transformations even among established actors. In contrast, restaurants with more modest prior status predominantly focused on changing descriptive elements to signal their formal alignment with elite standards, without making substantive changes to their operational practices. This strategy seems geared toward communicating a form of symbolic membership in the higher ranks (Askin and Bothner, 2016).

REACTION TO CONSUMER EVALUATION

The next step in our research focused on understanding how organizations respond to online reviews, in particular, how they manage feedback "behind the scenes," that is, in running the restaurant. The literature on organizational responses to external pressures (Oliver, 1991; Crilly, Zollo, and Hansen, 2012; Durand, Hawn, and Ioannou, 2019) underscores how firms often resort to symbolic strategies to influence perceptions of change, leveraging mechanisms such as *framing* and *decoupling* (Fiss and Zajac, 2006; Bromley and Powell, 2012). These studies highlight the possible disconnect between rhetoric and practice, that is, between what companies publicly state and the actions they actually take. This gap may be particularly pronounced in the case of responses to online reviews, which offer organizations a concrete opportunity to promise change without necessarily implementing it.

To examine instances of potential *decoupling* in the face of online reviews, we need to overcome a relevant empirical challenge. While monitoring public responses is relatively easy, capturing internal organizational reactions requires an empirical approach capable of revealing behaviors that are usually unobservable. To this end, a *lab-in-the-field* experiment was conducted, involving a sample of restaurants in France. Participants were presented with a hypothetical scenario describing a potential online review of their establishment. By varying the intensity of the criticism, it was possible to observe the extent to which this manipulation affected the stated propensity to take in the feedback provided by the reviewer. Next, participants' online behavior was analyzed to understand the circumstances that would make restaurateurs more likely to respond to negative reviews by expressing a concrete intention to remedy the problems that came up. Finally, qualitative data collected for the study were used to contextualize the findings that emerged and delve into the mechanisms underlying the different response patterns.

The results of the analyses show that restaurants make strategic decisions regarding the degree of engagement in customer feedback management, both at the rhetorical level (through public statements promising corrective action), and at the substantive level (through actual changes in operational practices). In particular, the adoption of rhetorical strategies appears more likely when the review is particularly visible. This occurs in the case of detailed reviews, which take up more space on the restaurant's TripAdvisor page; reviews related to businesses located in tourist areas, where consumers rely more heavily on online ratings; reviews focused on the gastronomic offerings, touching on aspects central to the restaurant's identity; or reviews accompanied by very low ratings, which are more likely to attract readers' attention.

However, the results indicate that responses communicated online do not always correspond to concrete changes in organizational behavior. Some restaurants may show themselves to be more receptive simply because they are exposed to a high volume of reviews, without implying any real transformative intent. Others, while having the opportunity to take action, may choose not to do so due to lack of motivation (Bundy, Shropshire and Buchholtz, 2013) or by virtue of strategic evaluations based on cost-benefit reasoning (Durand, Hawn and Ioannou, 2019).

The characteristics of reviews and the consumers who formulate them also influence the likelihood that feedback will be accepted or ignored. Comments that are articulate and constructively worded tend to foster an open attitude on the part of the organization, while harsh judgments or direct criticism of identity dimensions of the business (such as food quality in the case of a restaurant) may generate resistance. This evidence suggests that emotional responses to feedback can markedly affect the reactions of organizational decision makers, even to the point of overriding, in some cases, rational, deliberative evaluation processes (Loewenstein and Lerner, 2003).

CONCLUSIONS

The research explores the role of intermediaries, to include professional evaluators who rank organizations (e.g., the Michelin Guide, which selects only a few restaurants and assigns stars to a small subset), as well as nonprofessional evaluators who write reviews (such as consumers on TripAdvisor, who assign a numerical score and write a commentary after their dining experience). We show that these actors have great influence over organizational behavior. Our results highlight how the introduction of a new status hierarchy can act as an "anxiety generator," causing organizations to modify their offerings and adapt their self-presentation to conform to public expectations. In addition, negative reviews act as powerful reaction catalysts, capable of triggering both online and offline responses.

However, the results also highlight the strategic nature of organizational responses. Changes in the way a restaurant presents oneself (e.g. with the menu) do not necessarily imply concrete operational transformations. Similarly, stating the intention to take action in response to an online review does not guarantee that this will actually happen. In this sense, our results contrast with the idea of direct, rigid control exercised by evaluators, regardless of their degree of professionalism (Karunakaran, Orlikowski and Scott, 2022). On the contrary, the research illustrates how organizations strategically shape their behavior in order to optimize their positioning in the eyes of the public, without necessarily sacrificing their long-term goals to satisfy immediate demands.

MANAGERIAL IMPACT FACTOR

- **Status is unstable and subject to scrutiny**: Even high-profile recognition can generate reputational pressures and induce defensive responses from organizations.
- **Hierarchical rankings transform organizational behavior**: The introduction of new ratings triggers changes in messages, pricing, and supply to align with elite expectations.
- **Rhetoric does not imply action**: Public statements in response to reviews or ratings do not guarantee concrete operational changes (strategic decoupling).
- **Engagement with reviews is selective**: Organizations respond more often to visible, detailed, or identity-threatening feedback, but concrete action depends on internal factors.
- **Digital platforms expand the evaluative arena**: Consumer reviews have become a structural component of companies' reputational positioning.
- **Organizational response is strategically modulated**: Firms choose when and how to respond, balancing public visibility, identity coherence, and long-term priorities.

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