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Meating Expectations: Category Legitimation and Transmutation

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Abstract. This study investigates how market actors legitimize new categories that challenge the foundational understandings of established ones while simultaneously seeking to compete in the same market space. We analyze the development of the U.S. plant-based meat category from 2012 to 2019, focusing on how plant-based meat producers positioned their products as legitimate competitors within the meat category despite their nonanimal origins. We identify three key legitimation strategies used by entrepreneurs: *reconfiguring the category basis* by reframing the core attributes of meat from animal origin to shared biochemical components; *creating experiential congruence* by replicating the sensory qualities and social practices associated with traditional meat; and *instilling value superiority* by emphasizing health, environmental, and ethical benefits along with forward-thinking innovation. Our observations also lead us to theorize what we term *category transmutation*—a construct for understanding how the successful legitimation of a new category might reshape the meaning and boundaries of an existing one. We envision category transmutation as a process through which an existing category evolves to incorporate both traditional and new subcategories, thereby vertically modifying the category structure. This study advances our understanding of category dynamics and extends the role of cultural entrepreneurship beyond gaining legitimacy to reshaping category systems and market structures, with the potential to drive positive societal changes.

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Keywords: legitimation • category dynamics • category transmutation • cultural entrepreneurship • relational nature of categories • market moralization

Research on category dynamics has enhanced our understanding of how market and product categories form (Durand and Khairé 2017), examining both how new categories emerge from substantial innovations (Navis and Glynn 2010, Grodal et al. 2015) and how market actors deliberately create them by rearranging sociocultural elements and practices within existing categories (Rao et al. 2003, Weber et al. 2008). These studies highlight the importance of balancing familiarity and novelty, showing that for new categories to gain legitimacy, market actors need to align certain aspects of the new offering with established categories while also introducing distinctive features (Hargadon and Douglas 2001, Lounsbury and Glynn 2001, Navis and Glynn 2010, Hsu and Grodal 2021). The extent of this balance depends largely on the nature of the innovation. Durand and Khairé (2017) note that when new categories draw on elements exogenous to the existing

category system, actors tend to position them outside established category boundaries, often using analogies from unrelated domains to emphasize their distinctiveness (e.g., *nouvelle cuisine*) (Rao et al. 2005). Conversely, when new categories recombine or rearrange existing elements, actors typically create niches within the existing category system by using discourses that resonate with audiences (e.g., postcolonial fiction) (Anand and Jones 2008). In other words, new categories driven by material innovations often emerge outside of existing category systems, whereas those rooted in cognitive innovations are more likely to be created within existing systems.

Although current research offers valuable insights into category formation and legitimation, it rarely addresses the growing instances where new categories diverge from existing ones in some fundamental ways yet seek legitimacy within the existing category

system. Technological advancements, in particular, have enabled the replication of core attributes in novel forms, challenging the ontological assumptions of existing categories and prompting a reassessment of legitimate category membership. Although prior research has emphasized the importance of balancing familiarity and novelty, we identify a dilemma rooted in broader institutional dynamics: contesting established meaning systems while maintaining legitimacy within prevailing norms and market structures. For example, laboratory-grown diamonds bypass the natural formation and mining processes while replicating the chemical and aesthetic properties of natural diamonds. Similarly, e-cigarettes innovate nicotine delivery by vaporizing it instead of burning tobacco while mimicking the experience of smoking (Hsu and Grodal 2021). In both cases, market actors reshape the core attributes of incumbent categories but preserve enough continuity (Durand et al. 2007) to ensure that their offerings are recognized within the existing category system. This requires skillfully navigating the dilemma of challenging established meaning systems while aligning with prevailing expectations. Our study explores the strategies that entrepreneurs employ to simultaneously contest the foundational assumptions of an established category and position their offerings as legitimate members within it.

To investigate these dynamics, we examine the plant-based meat sector in the United States, which serves as an ideal case due to how entrepreneurs challenge the foundational understanding of the meat category—its animal origin—while positioning plant-based products as direct competitors in the meat market. This sector offers an extreme yet revelatory case (Yin 2009) for studying how market actors reimagine the core attributes of established categories while seeking legitimacy within the very frameworks they contest. Through an inductive analysis of entrepreneurial actions between 2012 and 2019, we identify three key legitimation strategies: *reconfiguring the category basis* by reframing the ontological assumptions of meat; *creating experiential congruence* by replicating salient attributes of traditional meat, such as sensory qualities and associated social practices; and *instilling value superiority* by highlighting the forward-thinking benefits of plant-based meat products. Our findings show that entrepreneurs draw on symbolic and material cultural resources to reframe the ontological assumptions of meat, attempting to shift its basis from animal origin to its composition and properties; replicate the sensory attributes and social practices traditionally associated with meat to offer congruent experiences; and position plant-based meat as superior through value propositions centered on health, sustainability, and animal welfare as well as innovation. These legitimation strategies leverage the relational nature of categories (Lo et al. 2020, Soublière et al. 2024), fostering

connections and distinctions between new and existing categories by emphasizing both similarities and the perceived advantages of the new category.

Moreover, our investigation suggests that as a new category gains legitimacy, it has implications for the broader category system. The evolving relationship between the new and existing categories during the legitimation process has the potential to alter the meaning and boundaries of the incumbent category, which can, in turn, influence the structure and dynamics of the category system. In our context, some stakeholders have begun using “animal” as a modifier to distinguish traditional meat, hinting at a possible bifurcation of plant-based and animal meats into distinct subcategories within the broader meat category. These observations lead us to propose the theoretical construct of *category transmutation* to better understand how category relationships and structures might evolve as a new category forms and gains legitimacy. We conceptualize category transmutation as a process in which an existing category label shifts to a superordinate category,¹ reclassifying its incumbent members into a subcategory and placing the new category at the same hierarchical level, thereby introducing vertical modifications to the category structure. Although our study only suggests the early signs of such dynamics, this theoretical insight offers a novel approach to exploring how the legitimation of a new category might have implications beyond itself, potentially driving changes in categorical boundaries and market structures.

This study addresses an increasingly prevalent question in category dynamics. How do entrepreneurs legitimize and position new categories that challenge the foundational understandings of established ones while seeking to compete in the same market space? In answering this question, we contribute to the literature by moving beyond the traditional focus on balancing familiarity and novelty in the legitimation of new categories as well as on the distinction between category emergence and creation (Granqvist and Ritvala 2016, Durand and Khaire 2017, Durand et al. 2017). Instead, we demonstrate how market actors can simultaneously contest and align with established meaning systems by selectively transforming and preserving key elements of existing categories, offering a more nuanced approach to category formation. Additionally, we extend the relational view of categories (Lo et al. 2020, Soublière et al. 2024) by showing how new categories both derive meaning from and influence existing categories. In particular, we introduce the concept of category transmutation to explain how these interactions may eventually reshape categorical boundaries and structure. Moreover, our study enriches discussions on cultural entrepreneurship by illustrating how entrepreneurs leverage both symbolic and material cultural resources to facilitate category legitimation (e.g., Lounsbury and Glynn 2019,

Soublière and Lockwood 2022). Lastly, we offer new insights into the formation and positioning of value-laden categories, providing a fresh perspective on scaling moral markets and driving societal change through carefully crafted legitimation strategies (Arjaliès and Durand 2019, Hedberg and Lounsbury 2021).

The Ontological and Relational Foundations of Category Formation

Categories serve as essential cognitive and social interfaces, facilitating coordination and exchange among producers and consumers within market segments based on agreed-upon labels and meanings (Kennedy et al. 2010, Navis and Glynn 2010, Durand and Paolella 2013). Described as “consensual conceptual schemes that define goods being exchanged as experientially similar” (Lounsbury and Rao 2004, p. 970), product categories bring order to markets and help actors to identify competitors (Porac et al. 1995). Earlier research has focused on how categories constrain markets by enforcing boundaries and disciplining actors who deviate from established norms (Zuckerman 1999, Hsu 2006, Hsu et al. 2009, Kovács and Hannan 2010, Negro et al. 2010). More recent studies, however, highlight the agency of market actors in shaping category systems (Jones et al. 2012, Grodal et al. 2015, Pontikes and Kim 2017).

Scholars have increasingly focused on how categories form and evolve (Kennedy and Fiss 2013, Granqvist and Ritvala 2016, Durand et al. 2017, Lo et al. 2020). Durand and Khaire (2017) identify two main processes of category formation: emergence and creation. In emergence, new categories develop outside existing category systems when innovations introduced by new entrants do not fit within current classifications. These actors differentiate their offerings by drawing on elements from both distinct and related domains, ensuring sufficient novelty while maintaining enough similarity to established categories to capture audience interest and facilitate comprehension. In contrast, category creation occurs within existing category systems, often led by incumbents who redraw cognitive boundaries to access untapped niches without disrupting the overall market structure. Some new entrants create oppositional categories that challenge established ones by emphasizing normative values, as seen in microbreweries, grass-fed beef, and organic farming (Carroll and Swaminathan 2000, Weber et al. 2008, Sikavica and Pozner 2013, McKendrick and Hannan 2014, Verhaal et al. 2015). These categories emphasize values, such as authenticity, to position themselves as superior to incumbents without altering the category’s core attributes; microbrewery beer is still beer, and grass-fed beef remains beef. Instead, they differentiate by elevated values, carving out niches within existing markets.

Although these processes illustrate how market actors differentiate or align new categories with established ones in legitimizing the new category, they do not address the complications that they face when seeking to transform the foundational understandings of an existing category while simultaneously meeting its legitimacy expectations. These foundational understandings or ontological assumptions encompass not only the typical features that define category membership (e.g., Rosch 1978, Hannan et al. 2019) but also, deeply ingrained beliefs about the core attributes that audiences conventionally expect from the category. These include its features, processes, and underlying concepts, which are widely recognized within a particular society as part of its social reality (Ruef 1999, Kennedy and Fiss 2013). Such assumptions largely remain implicit and unquestioned until they are challenged, frequently by technological innovations that enable novel instantiations of these core attributes. For instance, the introduction of synthetically manufactured laboratory-grown diamonds contests the long-held ontological assumption that diamonds are naturally formed over millions of years, mined, and meticulously crafted, thereby altering the traditional meaning of “diamond.” Thus, for market actors aiming to legitimize new categories with core attributes fundamentally different from those of existing categories yet seeking to compete within the same market, the undertaking extends beyond simply balancing familiarity and novelty. It requires navigating the dilemma of reshaping the foundational understandings of the existing category while still aligning with its established expectations.

As market actors deploy various cultural resources—such as narratives, labels, value attributes, material features, and sociocultural practices—to legitimize new categories, they must carefully navigate their relationships with existing ones. Traditionally, these efforts have been examined through the lens of association or dissociation, where actors align with one category while distancing from another (e.g., Vergne 2012, Granqvist et al. 2013, Ozcan and Gurses 2018, Granqvist and Siltaoja 2020, Hsu and Grodal 2021). However, when a new category has fundamentally different core attributes from existing categories but aims to compete within the same market space, this association-dissociation framework becomes more complex and in some cases, less relevant. Although association and dissociation help position new categories in relation to established ones, they offer limited insight into how market actors can reshape established understandings of an incumbent category without alienating audiences embedded in existing expectations.

Moreover, these legitimation strategies often have a reciprocal effect on the existing category. As market actors reframe the ontological assumptions of an existing category in the process of legitimizing a new one, the successful legitimation of the new category can

alter the meaning and boundaries of the established category, potentially triggering a restructuring of the broader category system. For example, the official inclusion of laboratory-grown diamonds within the diamond category² has changed the meaning of diamonds, repositioning laboratory-grown diamonds from mere substitutes to direct competitors of natural diamonds. In this regard, recent studies adopting a relational view of categories (Emirbayer 1997, Mische 2011) provide valuable insights. These works show how actions within one category can ripple across adjacent categories, influencing their meanings and viability within the broader category system (Lo et al. 2020, Soublière et al. 2024). These shifts may lead to broader effects, including changes in consumer evaluations and preferences, shifts in competitive dynamics, and even the unfolding of social and cultural transformations. In the case of diamonds, the redefinition has implications beyond consumer choices, influencing geopolitical dynamics and ethical considerations within the diamond industry.

In this study, we investigate how market actors navigate the dilemma of altering the foundational understandings of an existing category while meeting its established expectations. Specifically, we focus on the legitimation strategies of plant-based meat producers as they seek to challenge the ontological assumptions of the meat category, namely that meat must originate from animals, while positioning their products as legitimate direct competitors within the meat category. Furthermore, we explore how the legitimation of plant-based meat might influence the meaning and boundaries of the meat category.

Methods

Research Setting

We conducted a case study of the U.S. plant-based meat sector from 2012 to 2019, a compelling setting to examine how plant-based meat producers establish legitimacy and competitive standing within the broader meat category despite their products' nonanimal origins. Unlike the meat substitutes category in the 1990s that targeted vegans and vegetarians, contemporary plant-based meats aim to compete directly with traditional meat in mainstream markets. Our case study approach, although acknowledging potential bias due to selective sampling, provides detailed insights into the phenomenon with considerable depth, offering a basis for theory development (Eisenhardt and Graebner 2007, Yin 2009, Ozcan et al. 2017).

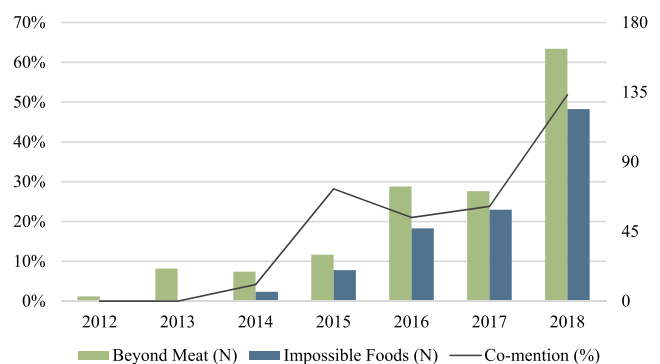
Data Sources

Our primary data consist of archival materials from 2012 to 2019, tracing the activities of the two most prominent plant-based meat companies: Beyond Meat and Impossible Foods. These firms were selected because of

their dominant media presence; approximately 70% of plant-based meat coverage in leading U.S. newspapers during this period featured these companies, frequently mentioning them as competitors (see Figure 1). We chose 2012 as the starting point because it marked Beyond Meat's first product launch and the beginning of its active media engagement, a period that coincided with notable revenue growth in the plant-based meat market (e.g., Grand View Research 2018). Data collection concluded in April 2019, shortly before Beyond Meat's initial public offering (IPO) in May 2019,³ which marked the end of the category's nascent phase and likely shifted the scope of media representation.

To examine firm-level actions and their reception, we collected data from multiple sources, including press releases, articles from major and local newspapers, industry news outlets,⁴ and historical web pages from the Internet Archive Wayback Machine. This allowed us to analyze both the firms' self-presentations and media portrayals. Although newspapers reached general audiences, industry news outlets catered to stakeholders with purchasing influence over plant-based meat products, such as retailers (e.g., *Supermarket News* and *Progressive Grocer*) and food service operators (e.g., *Fast Casual* and *QSRweb*). Other media outlets targeted food industry professionals (e.g., *FoodNavigator*) and health-conscious communities (e.g., *Delicious Living* and *New Hope Network*). We also gathered chief executive officer (CEO) interviews from media outlets and advocacy organizations as well as podcast interviews (e.g., Burnell et al. 2023),⁵ which are particularly effective in reaching younger demographics, like millennials and Gen Z, who are key target consumers of plant-based meat products. These interviews provided unscripted, real-time conversations, reducing recall biases and post

Figure 1. (Color online) Proportion of Media Articles Comentioning Beyond Meat and Impossible Foods, 2012–2018



Notes. Although our primary data collection extends until April 2019, this figure includes data only up to the end of 2018. After Beyond Meat's S-1 filing in November 2018 and its subsequent public offering in May 2019, media coverage surged, with a significant increase in the comentioning of the two companies as major competitors.

hoc rationalizations. Using Listen Notes, a podcast search engine, we identified and transcribed 41 episodes featuring executives from the two firms as main guests (25 from Beyond Meat and 16 from Impossible Foods), each averaging about 45 minutes in duration. Table 1 provides an overview of our data sources and their respective contributions to our analysis.

To supplement our archival data, we collected visual materials, including packaging designs, restaurant menus, and in-store displays. Author E.Y.R. attended the Good Food Conference in 2019 and participated in online conferences and webinars, engaging in informal conversations to deepen our market understanding. Additionally, we interviewed five experts involved in the formation of the plant-based meat category: a policy specialist, an investor, a journalist, and executives from the focal firms.⁶

Data Analysis

Given the exploratory nature of our research, we adopted an inductive approach to facilitate theory development (Strauss and Corbin 1998). Our overarching question—how entrepreneurial firms legitimize the plant-based meat category as a credible competitor to traditional meat despite its nonanimal origins—guided our methodology,

which combined a longitudinal case study and content analysis. The analytical process involved four iterative phases, with continuous back-and-forth between data, emerging codes, and theoretical refinement as we adapted to emerging insights and new information. We ensured methodological rigor by closely following recent standards in qualitative research (e.g., Grodal et al. 2021), particularly regarding the use of archival data (Grodal et al. 2024).

In the first phase, we conducted open coding of press releases and media articles related to the two focal firms. This process identified recurring keywords and phrases that reflected the firms' distinct value propositions centered on a commitment to addressing climate change, health concerns, and animal welfare—areas where traditional meat producers were lagging. We also observed that both firms adopted an innovation-driven approach to tackle these grand challenges, similar to Silicon Valley start-ups. Additionally, we noted their deliberate differentiation from traditional meat substitutes, which led us to expand our data collection to include archival materials dating back to 1992 to enhance our understanding of the category's historical context and to capture recent positioning shifts.

Table 1. Data Sources and Use in Analysis

Data type	Data source	Use in analysis	Quantity and time coverage
Media articles	Major U.S. newspapers (<i>New York Times</i> , <i>Washington Post</i> , <i>Los Angeles Times</i> , <i>Chicago Tribune</i> , and <i>Wall Street Journal</i>)	Track changes and the variety of category labels attached to meat substitute products and their associated meanings	515 (1992–2019)
	Major and local U.S. newspapers (e.g., <i>Philadelphia Daily News</i> , <i>San Diego Union Tribune</i>) as well as industry news outlets (e.g., <i>Progressive Grocer</i> , <i>Nation's Restaurant News</i>)	Understand the overall plant-based movement, and identify plant-based product categories	661 (1992–2019)
	Interviews published by advocacy organizations (e.g., Animal Charity Evaluators) and technology-oriented news publishers (e.g., <i>TechCrunch</i>)	Obtain direct quotes from the CEOs of two focal firms to understand their perspectives and motivations	8 (2012–2019, Beyond Meat); 7 (2016–2019, Impossible Foods)
Press releases	PR Newswire, Business Wire	Gather detailed information on two focal firms, Beyond Meat and Impossible Foods, specifically their self-description, values, use of different labels, and discussion of other relevant categories	46 (2013–2019, Beyond Meat); 70 (2015–2019, Impossible Foods)
Interviews	Interviews conducted by various podcast channels (e.g., <i>How I Built This</i> –NPR, <i>The Rich Roll Podcast</i> , <i>Vox Conversations</i>)	Gather detailed information on two focal firms, Beyond Meat and Impossible Foods, and obtain direct quotes from the key executives of two focal firms to understand their perspectives and motivations	25 (2014–2019, Beyond Meat); 17 (2016–2019, Impossible Foods)
	Expert interviews	Consult and triangulate facts and findings	5 interviews (2021; executives, journalist, investor, policy specialist)

The second phase involved analyzing interviews with CEOs and key executives from both companies to gain deeper insights into their strategic actions and underlying rationales. This allowed us to assess how the public narratives were aligned with what is articulated by key executives, confirming emerging patterns across data sources. During this phase, we refined our analytical focus by posing more targeted questions (Langley 1999), particularly on how the firms leveraged cultural resources to legitimize the new category, drawing on the cultural entrepreneurship literature. This provided deeper insights into how various symbolic and material cultural resources were connected to the preliminary first-order concepts. Additional first-order concepts also emerged, particularly around how the firms strategically adopted the plant-based meat label and replicated the tangible attributes of traditional meat, such as its sensory experience and its placement in grocery stores and restaurants. Simultaneously, both firms projected a forward-thinking and modern image, conveying their superiority over the traditional meat industry's outdated practices. Once the first-order codes were saturated, we compiled a chronological overview of the case history, which is presented in an abbreviated form at the end of this section.

In the third phase, we systematically compared our preliminary first-order concepts to explore their relationships through axial coding (Strauss and Corbin 1998, p. 96), which allowed us to reorganize and refine these concepts into second-order themes. For example, “designing product packing to resemble that of traditional meat” and “replicating the sensory experience of meat” were consolidated under the theme “mirroring the tangible characteristics of the existing category,” reflecting firms’ efforts to bridge the sensory gap between plant-based and traditional meats. In contrast, “deconstructing the core attributes of meat based on its biochemical components” and “emphasizing the shared attributes between plant-based and traditional meat” were grouped under the theme “reframing the foundations of the existing category,” reflecting firms’ efforts to revise the animal-centric definition of meat. Table 2 presents illustrative excerpts that demonstrate the first-order concepts associated with each second-order theme.

In the final phase, we integrated the second-order themes into broader theoretical dimensions to develop an integrated theoretical account (Gioia et al. 2013). This process involved iteratively relating our empirical findings with relevant theories, continuously adjusting our analysis as new insights emerged (Grodal et al. 2021). We also triangulated our findings by crossreferencing multiple data sources to enhance consistency and credibility in our interpretations. Through this process, we identified three theoretical dimensions representing key legitimation strategies that target cognitive,

physical, experiential, and normative category attributes: reconfiguring the category basis, creating experiential congruence, and instilling value superiority. Table 3 presents the data structure, illustrating the relationships between the first-order concepts, second-order themes, and theoretical dimensions.

Moreover, our findings showed that the legitimation strategies employed by the plant-based meat producers both transformed and preserved key aspects of the meat category, prompting us to explore how the newly formed category might reshape the meaning and boundaries of the existing category. A content analysis of media coverage revealed an evolving discourse that increasingly used modifiers, like “traditional” or “animal,” to distinguish between meat types by their sources, suggesting not only a growing recognition of plant-based meat as a distinct category but also, its emergent positioning alongside traditional meat as subcategories within a broader meat category. Because existing concepts of category dynamics do not sufficiently address this relational transformation, we propose the concept of category transmutation to explain how the introduction of a new category can alter relationships among categories and potentially restructure category systems through vertical modifications. This construct, elaborated in a subsequent section, explores how such transformation can have implications beyond market dynamics to influence meaning systems and drive shifts in societal values.

Chronological Summary

Before new entrants began promoting the plant-based meat category around 2010, the United States had a long history of meat substitutes dating back to the 1920s, with notable growth in the 1990s. Companies like Boca Burger and Worthington Foods targeted vegans and vegetarians, whereas many meat eaters dismissed these products or perceived them as a “taste compromise,” where flavor was sacrificed for health or ethical reasons (Roberts 2003). After many meat substitute producers were acquired by major food companies, such as Kellogg and Kraft Foods, the category remained niche throughout the 2000s.

Beyond Meat⁷ was founded in 2009 by Ethan Brown, who was motivated by a desire to reduce the environmental impact of animal agriculture and improve animal welfare. Brown asked, “Do we need animals for meat production?” The company’s initial product development was guided by food scientists at the University of Missouri specializing in high-moisture extrusion techniques to enhance the meat-like texture of plant proteins (Guarino 2016). In 2011, Beyond Meat received significant investment from Kleiner Perkins Caufield & Byers, one of the most prestigious venture capital (VC) firms, in its first investment in a food startup (Stone 2015). The company’s first product Chicken-Free Strips, which was launched in 2012, was well

Table 2. Summary of Illustrative Data

Second-order themes	First-order concepts	Illustrative data for first-order concepts
Reframing the foundations of the existing category	Deconstructing the core attributes of meat based on its biochemical components	<p>“Meat is basically five things: amino acids, lipids, and water, plus some trace minerals and trace carbohydrates” (Beyond Meat; Stone 2015).</p> <p>“We have to be the world’s meat experts ... and that’s how we were able to discover a lot of very fundamental things about what underlies the sensory properties of meat, particularly heme” (Impossible Foods; Swisher and Goode 2017).</p> <p>“You don’t need an animal to create meat ... Meat is very understandable—it’s lipids, it’s trace minerals and it’s water. None of those have exclusive residence in the animal, so why use the animal to organize them?” (Impossible Foods; Hincks 2018, p. 1).</p>
	Emphasizing the shared attributes between plant-based and traditional meat	<p>“These are all things that are abundant in nonanimal sources and in plants” (Beyond Meat; Stone 2015).</p> <p>“We had to understand in great detail what it is about the burger in molecular terms that gives it that very distinctive flavor and aroma and handling properties and cooking properties and texture and juiciness and stuff like that” (Impossible Foods; Hicks and Stein 2016).</p> <p>“We could go out and find sustainable, scalable, affordable plant sources for ingredients that matched—with respect to the salient biochemical properties—the molecular components of meat, and then use that to make our own meat” (Impossible Foods; Swisher and Goode 2017).</p> <p>“It’s just meat that’s been built from plants ... if you have the same things, it’s presented the same way, tastes the same way, why can’t we call that meat?” (Beyond Meat; Fox 2018).</p>
Claiming a shared label with the existing category	Using the meat label, and targeting meat eaters	<p>“We want the hard-core beef lovers, the guy who’s basically saying, ‘You know, I’m literally on the opposite pole from a vegetarian, in no conceivable universe would I accept any substitute for meat’” (Impossible Foods; Rusli 2014, p. B1).</p> <p>“... compete in the marketplace <i>particularly for the consumers who are currently buying the foods that we get from animals</i>” (Impossible Foods; Swisher and Goode 2017).</p> <p>“Brown says he’s not interested in offering vegans another option; instead, he <i>wants to win over omnivores</i>” (Impossible Foods; Gajanan 2018, p. 1).</p>
	Avoiding terms like substitute or vegan	<p>“We are <i>not trying to make a meat alternative</i>” (Impossible Foods; Bradshaw 2014).</p> <p>“Our Beast Burger ... it’s <i>not a veggie burger ... not a meat substitute or alternative</i>” (Beyond Meat; Watson 2015).</p> <p>“It’s <i>not going to live as [a] veggie burger on the menu</i>” (Impossible Foods; Kowitt 2017).</p> <p>“... <i>avoids the words vegan or vegetarian</i>” (Beyond Meat; Choi 2018).</p> <p>Visual data (see Figure 2)</p>
Mirroring the tangible characteristics of the existing category	<p>Designing product packaging to resemble that of traditional meat</p> <p>Replicating the sensory experience of meat (visual appeal, texture, palate, etc.)</p>	<p>“The process takes plant proteins and realigns them to mimic the appearance and the mouth-feel of animal proteins” (Beyond Meat; ABC News 2012).</p> <p>“Brown believes the recipe to a good piece of meatless substitute is the texture” (Beyond Meat; Chiang 2014).</p> <p>“Our ground beef sizzles, smells, feels, and tastes just like ground beef from an animal ... Our ‘plant blood’ contains the same molecule, and is the main reason our plant meat tastes like animal meat when you cook it” (Impossible Foods; Ringen 2014).</p> <p>“The only way to accomplish our mission is to give every possible pleasure a meat eater gets from their eating experience” (Impossible Foods; Bradshaw 2014).</p> <p>“We were able to get fat distributed throughout a patty” (Beyond Meat; Guarino 2016).</p> <p>“... leghemoglobin gives our burger its unmistakably meaty taste” (Impossible Foods; Geggel 2016).</p>

Table 2. (Continued)

Second-order themes	First-order concepts	Illustrative data for first-order concepts
Emulating the social practices associated with the existing category	Featuring products within traditional meat sections on restaurant menus	<p>“We knew that in order for this to be successful as a replacement for ground beef, we had to deliver all those same properties for consumers, so they could make their choice” (Impossible Foods; Dai 2016).</p> <p>“That little bit of fat leak-out. Those meaty, those roasty, those caramelized notes” (Impossible Foods; Kerr 2016).</p> <p>“It’s going to <i>live side-by-side with the beef burger</i>” (Impossible Foods; Kowitt 2017).</p> <p>“... on the lunch menu <i>beneath an authentically meaty ‘Italian Dip’ brisket sandwich</i>” (Impossible Burger; Rothman 2018).</p>
	Positioning products next to traditional meat offerings in retail environments	<p>“The company is pushing for stores to <i>stock its meat at the meat counter</i>, alongside real chicken” (Beyond Meat; Manjoo 2012).</p> <p>“It’s a foot in the door into the mainstream protein case where Americans buy their protein ... we’ve been <i>knocking on the door of the meat case</i> since the first day I started the company in 2009” (Beyond Meat; Guarino 2016).</p> <p>“Having the country’s largest grocery chain on-board to <i>place the Beyond Burger in their meat aisle</i> is an important step in broadening the way people think about, and define, meat. The meat section is where a majority of shoppers are accustomed to shopping for protein, and we’re BEYOND grateful to be there!” (Beyond Meat 2017).</p>
Aligning with the practices of an innovative category	Excluding products from designated vegetarian product areas	<p>“[G]et out of the <i>penalty box that’s the ‘alternative’ section</i> in the supermarket” (Beyond Meat; Strom 2016).</p> <p>“... they cannot succeed if they are relegated to the <i>‘specialty food’ sections of the grocery store</i>” (Beyond Meat & Impossible Foods; Purdy 2017).</p>
	Operating with the innovative approach typical of technology start-ups	<p>“... we have products today called chicken 2.0 and beef 2.0 where we’re narrowing the gap between animal proteins around texture” (Beyond Meat; Chiang 2014).</p> <p>“When there’s a more incremental change, we’ll give it a number,” Brown explained. “It’s like software: OS 10, OS 10.1, OS 10.2, you know?” (Impossible Foods; Fromson 2015).</p> <p>“... and the thing that really distinguishes the company is that we spend millions of dollars each year on research and development” (Beyond Meat; Bockman 2015).</p> <p>“We have the brightest scientists and we’re going to fund them at a level that this work deserves” (Beyond Meat; Kowitt 2017).</p>
Infusing value attributes into the new category	Showcasing investments from high-profile venture capitalists and investors	<p>“... Investors in Beyond Meat include Bill Gates, Twitter cofounders Biz Stone and Evan Williams; investment firms Kleiner-Perkins Caufield & Byers, Morgan Creek Capital, and Closed Loop Capital; Seth Goldman, founder of Honest Tea; Humane Society of the United States” (Beyond Meat 2014).</p> <p>“... Impossible Foods is a private company funded in part by Khosla Ventures, Bill Gates, Google Ventures, Horizons Ventures, UBS, and Viking Global Investors” (Impossible Foods 2016b).</p>
	Emphasizing the environment and animal welfare benefits of the products	<p>“... by making it healthier, more humane, and better for the environment” (Beyond Meat; Raz 2017).</p> <p>“We are able to optimize our meats for deliciousness, sustainability, nutrition and affordability” (Impossible Foods; Kolodny 2017).</p>
	Promoting the health benefits of the products	<p>“With more protein and iron than beef as well as more omegas than salmon and a proprietary blend of nutrients, it is free of GMOs, soy and gluten” (Beyond Meat, 2015).</p> <p>“There are public health issues; there are food safety risks; there’s antibiotics and hormones that go into it (meat); the cholesterol, even the environmental impact” (Impossible Foods; Klein 2016).</p>

received in the market. Twitter cofounder Biz Stone said, “I’d get the waiter to come over and ask if he’d accidentally given us real chicken” (Manjoo 2012), and

New York Times food writer Mark Bittman admitted mistaking it for real meat: “Fooled me badly” (Bittman 2012). In 2013, Beyond Meat’s chicken strips were

Table 3. Coding Structure

First-order concepts	Second-order themes	Theoretical dimensions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deconstructing the core attributes of meat based on its biochemical components • Emphasizing the shared attributes between plant-based and traditional meat 	Reframing the foundations of the existing category	Reconfiguring the category basis
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Using the meat label and targeting meat eaters • Avoiding terms like substitute or vegan 	Claiming a shared label with the existing category	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Designing product packaging to resemble that of traditional meat • Replicating the sensory experience of meat (visual appeal, texture, palate, etc.) 	Mirroring the tangible characteristics of the existing category	Creating experiential congruence
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Featuring products within traditional meat sections on restaurant menus • Positioning products next to traditional meat offerings in retail environments • Excluding products from designated vegetarian product areas 	Emulating the social practices associated with the existing category	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Operating with the innovative approach typical of technology companies • Showcasing investments from high-profile venture capitalists and investors 	Aligning with the practices of an innovative category	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emphasizing the environment and animal welfare benefits of the products • Promoting the health benefits of the products 	Infusing value attributes into the new category	Instilling value superiority

distributed nationally at Whole Foods Market. That same year, the company secured additional funding, including from Bill Gates, who praised the product by saying he “couldn’t tell the difference” between Beyond Meat’s chicken strips and real chicken (Schwartz 2013). Over the years, Beyond Meat introduced several new products, such as Beyond Beef crumbles (2014), Beast Burger frozen patties (2015), Beyond Burger raw patties (2016), and Beyond Sausage (2017). By its 2019 IPO, Beyond Meat products were available in approximately 30,000 retailers, restaurants, and food service locations globally, including major food chains, such as Carl’s Jr. and Del Taco (Beyond Meat 2019b).

Impossible Foods, founded in 2011 by Stanford biochemistry professor Patrick (Pat) O. Brown, aimed to reduce the environmental impact of animal agriculture by creating plant-based meat products that closely mimic traditional meat. Backed by prominent VC firms, such as Google Ventures and Khosla Ventures, along with Bill Gates, the company spent several years conducting extensive research before launching the Impossible Burger in 2016. To promote its burger patties, Impossible Foods formed high-profile partnerships with celebrity chefs, such as David Chang of the Momofuku restaurant group and Traci Des Jardins of Jardinière, bolstering its reputation for meat-like taste

and texture. Early reviews, including an informal tasting organized by the *New York Times*, were highly favorable (Gelles 2017). The burger soon became available in over 5,000 U.S. restaurants in 2018, including the hamburger chain White Castle (Impossible Foods 2018). By 2019, the company expanded its reach, introducing its products to chains like QDOBA Mexican Eats and Burger King (Samuel 2019). Additionally, in late 2019, the products became widely accessible to consumers in grocery stores.

The growth of the plant-based meat category was supported by several favorable external conditions. In February 2015, the Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee pointed out the health risks associated with processed meats and advocated for plant-based proteins (Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee 2015). Later that year, the International Agency for Research on Cancer, a division of the World Health Organization, designated processed meat as a carcinogen and red meat as a probable carcinogen, heightening public interest in flexitarian diets and plant-based meat products. This period also witnessed a broader surge in consumer demand for plant-based foods. Between 2012 and 2018, the U.S. market saw a 268% increase in new food and beverage products labeled “plant based,” including milk, cheese, and yogurt (Formanski 2019),

with plant-based meat sales increasing by 38% between 2017 and 2019 (Good Food Institute 2020).

This favorable market environment coexisted with considerable challenges. Beyond Meat's early journey illustrates these complexities; although it secured funding from Kleiner Perkins in 2011, CEO Ethan Brown still faced investor skepticism about his "scant track record" and the market's potential and experienced financial constraints, struggling to get a hotel room on "his maxed-out credit cards" as late as 2013 (Darmiento 2020, p. C1). Further obstacles arose as anti-Genetically Modified Organism (GMO) activists and health critics questioned the products' ingredients and ultraprocessed nature (Scipioni 2019); the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) scrutinized Impossible Foods' novel soy leghemoglobin (Strom 2017); and industry groups, like the National Cattlemen's Beef Association, leveraged consumer confusion to advocate for stricter labeling regulations (McCarthy 2020). Notably, these frictions were not solely external; by positioning their products as "meat" through novel formulations and legitimation strategies, producers sometimes invited heightened regulatory and public scrutiny.

Legitimizing Plant-Based Meat Within the Meat Category

Our findings reveal three key legitimation strategies that helped establish the plant-based meat category as a legitimate competitor to traditional meat despite its nonanimal origins. Entrepreneurs leveraged a range of cultural resources to reconfigure the category basis, create experiential congruence, and instill value superiority. These strategies, both individually and collectively, played an instrumental role in positioning plant-based meat as a viable contender within the broader meat market.

Strategy 1. Reconfiguring the Category Basis

Both firms actively reframed the understanding of meat's core attributes, moving away from its traditional association with animal origins and focusing instead on its material properties. This conceptual shift combined with innovations in plant-based materials that replicated meat's sensory qualities (as detailed in Strategy 2) was essential to claiming the meat identity and adopting the "plant-based meat" label. This approach constructed a cognitive link with traditional meat while preventing their products from being seen as alternatives or substitutes, which could imply a distance from traditional meat. By constructing plant-based meat as a legitimate variation within the broader meat category, these firms effectively positioned their products to compete with traditional meat.

Reframing the Foundations of the Existing Category. Our analysis revealed that both firms deconstructed the essence of meat by breaking it down into its components. This reframing redirected attention from meat's traditional association with animal origins to its biochemical composition and functional properties, redefining what qualifies as "meat." Beyond Meat's CEO Ethan Brown envisioned a future where this perception shift is complete, stating that "[f]ifty years from now, my hope is that beef and chicken will no longer have a relationship to the animal they came from ... It will be based on plant-based inputs" (Strickland 2013). Brown further explained in a podcast why Beyond Meat's products qualify as meat, emphasizing that their products share the same composition as traditional meat.

[M]eat is this composition of materials. ... It's amino acids, it's lipids, it's water, very small amount of carbohydrates, and a very small amount of minerals. That's what meat is. We understand that. We look at it, we say, okay, those things are in meat. That's what makes meat up. Then you look at the blueprint of meat and you say, okay well, meat is organized in this way: the amino acids are stitched together like this, the fat is distributed like that. So, if we understand the blueprint of meat and we understand what goes into meat, then we can create those through a very simple heating, cooling, and pressure process. Why isn't that a piece of meat, right? It has all the same things in it. It's organized like it is. (Martinez 2015)

He elaborated, stating that the "reason we want to use the word *meat* is that we firmly believe that this is a piece of meat. That if you look at meat not in terms of its origin. ... but if you look at meat in terms of composition—we are hitting all of those key points of composition" (CBS News 2018); in other words, "we're simply suggesting ... a new type of meat, just plant based" (Bronner 2018).

Impossible Foods CEO Pat Brown conveyed a similar sentiment, remarking that "[w]e are not trying to make a meat alternative. We are making meat a better way" (Bradshaw 2014). He further emphasized that his goal is "nothing less than redefining meat to include plant protein" (Guarino 2016). The company's principal scientist elaborated on their approach: "We wanted to look at what is meat and ... break it down into all the molecular components that make up meat and try to understand what makes meat, meat" (Buhr 2016). Pat Brown argued that defining meat by its animal origin was a "fundamental fallacy" (Latif 2017), a point he expanded upon in a 2017 podcast interview.

[T]he problem isn't that people love meat, it's that we've defined meat too narrowly. ... We've defined it in terms of the technology that we use today to produce it as opposed to in terms of what consumers actually value. ... What consumers actually value is

the special kind of deliciousness they get from meat ... the nutritional value, protein and iron. ... But it turns out they love it not because it is made using animals. ... If you say there's this particular sort of broadly defined flavor and sensory profile that anyone would recognize as meat, and if you say, "I want meat for dinner," any number of things will satisfy it. (Swisher and Goode 2017)

Beyond Meat's "meat as a blueprint" metaphor and Impossible Foods' claim that "meat has been defined too narrowly" demonstrate their deliberate efforts to reconceptualize the category's essence away from its animal origins. Both firms framed meat in terms of its material properties, emphasizing the shared attributes between plant-based and traditional meat. This approach expanded the cognitive boundaries of the meat category and provided a compelling rationale for classifying their offerings within the broader meat category.

Claiming a Shared Label with the Existing Category. Both firms aimed to engage mainstream meat eaters by using the term "meat" in their category designation, intentionally distancing their products from the existing meat substitutes category and actively avoiding vegan or vegetarian labels. These efforts aligned with the broader plant-based movement. Although Beyond Meat initially used variations of the "plant-based protein" label, it began using the "plant-based meat" label as early as October 2013. Similarly, Impossible Foods initially described its products as "meat from plants" or referred to them as "plant-based food" (Impossible Foods 2016a), but it shifted to the "plant-based meat" label in 2017.

Pat Brown, CEO of Impossible Foods, made it clear from the outset, stating in 2012 that "I have zero interest in making a new food just for vegans" (Hanlon 2012) and later noting that selling to vegans or vegetarians would be "a complete waste in terms of our mission" (Swisher and Goode 2017). Beyond Meat took a more gradual approach, initially naming its first product "Veggie Chicken Strips" in 2012 but quickly transitioning to "Chicken-Free Strips." Historical web pages of Beyond Meat also show that it frequently referenced vegans and vegetarians in its blog posts (e.g., "5 Vegan books to read" and "How to host a vegan potluck") until early 2014. By the time the company launched the Beast burger, it explicitly stated that "it's not a veggie burger ... not a meat substitute or alternative" (Watson 2016). Beyond Meat's vice president stated: "To crossover into the mainstream market, we have to compete with beef and chicken" (Watson 2014). Pat Brown of Impossible Foods also emphasized: "Our mission requires us to compete successfully for the hardcore, uncompromising meat lover who has no interest or minimal interest in replacing meat"

(Swisher and Goode 2017) and "win over omnivores with plant-derived products" (Hincks 2018, p. 1). Taken together, the adoption of the "plant-based meat" label was crucial in transforming perceptions of these products from mere substitutes to legitimate members of the meat category. This change also broadened their appeal to mainstream meat eaters, establishing plant-based meat as a viable competitor within the broader meat market.

Summary. Our findings reveal how entrepreneurial firms strategically reconceptualize the core attributes of an established category by reframing its foundational understandings while simultaneously seeking recognition within the same category. This process involves actively challenging and redefining the category's ontological assumptions, which are the "sets of things widely seen by any society as social realities" (Kennedy and Fiss 2013, p. 1139) or the culturally available schemata that "provide default assumptions about their characteristics, relationships and entailments" (DiMaggio 1997, p. 269). In the case of plant-based meat, entrepreneurs directly contested the implicit understanding or presupposition (Hannan et al. 2019) that meat originates exclusively from animals, thereby altering the causal theory of what qualifies as meat within the category (Chang-Zunino and Grodal 2024). The reframing shifted focus from the source of meat to its biochemical and functional properties. Firms argued that their products, based on these properties, fulfill the same functions as traditional meat, which suggests a shift from prototype-based to goal-based categorization (Paoletta and Durand 2016, Boulongne and Durand 2021, Gouvard and Durand 2023). This strategic reorientation expanded the category's cognitive boundaries, creating space to position plant-based meat as a legitimate contender within the broader meat category. Additionally, this approach provided the grounds for co-opting the "meat" label for plant-based products while making deliberate anti-identity claims to distance their offerings from the existing meat substitutes category (Stanske et al. 2020). Beyond mere categorization, the use of the "plant-based meat" label facilitates relational meaning making by bridging new offerings with established categories (Navis and Glynn 2010, Grodal et al. 2015, Lo and Kennedy 2015).

By reframing the ontological assumptions of meat and aligning with its mainstream audiences through shared labeling, these entrepreneurial firms positioned their products as legitimate members within an expanded meat category that includes both animal- and plant-based options. This strategy highlights the critical role of reshaping conventional understandings of existing categories as a way to legitimize new ones, demonstrating how cognitive boundaries can be expanded to accommodate

innovations that differ significantly in their core attributes from established categories.

Strategy 2. Creating Experiential Congruence

As both firms expanded the boundaries of the meat category and claimed equivalence, they focused on replicating the salient attributes of traditional meat to ensure that their products were experientially comparable. This approach aligned plant-based meat products with traditional meat not only in sensory attributes but also, in contextual aspects, such as consumption and shopping experiences, ensuring that their products occupied similar mental and physical spaces. By orchestrating congruence across these various dimensions, the firms reinforced the perception that their products are, indeed, meat.

Mirroring the Tangible Characteristics of the Existing Category. Food science research shows that the sensory pleasures of meat—its texture, flavor, and aroma—pose major barriers to changing dietary habits (He et al. 2020). Replicating these sensory attributes was, therefore, critical. Beyond Meat aimed to recreate the full meat-eating experience, stating that its product “doesn’t sacrifice on taste, chew or satisfaction” (Beyond Meat 2013) and spending seven years perfecting “the architecture of meat” (Dai 2016). Impossible Foods pursued a “No Compromise” product (Impossible Foods 2016b) that “sizzles, smells, feels, and tastes just like ground beef from an animal.” CEO Pat Brown emphasized replicating key sensory elements, including the “molecule responsible for the red look of animal meat ... (which) provides an important component of meat’s taste” (Peters 2014). Both companies introduced unique ingredients to enhance the realism and appeal of their offerings. Beyond Meat used beet juice extract to simulate beef’s “bleeding,” whereas Impossible Foods incorporated heme to replicate the key molecule in animal meat. A chef at Des Jardins, one of Impossible Food’s early restaurant partners, articulated the appeal of its product, highlighting that “[a]ll the amino acids and the heme that come together in the taste, that’s what got me” (Hoshaw 2016). These innovations focused on enhancing the pleasure of eating, a crucial aspect of consumer acceptance. As Pat Brown remarked, “For the vast majority of people, food is a huge part of the pleasure of life. And it’s so important to their quality of life. It’s not just nutrition, it’s pleasure. ... So you have to deliver on the pleasure of eating or, you know, people aren’t going to be interested” (Klein 2016). By prioritizing taste, both companies aimed to overcome the perception that plant-based meats are inferior in sensory experience and broaden their appeal to mainstream consumers.

In addition, both firms designed product packaging to resemble traditional meat products, further aligning with consumer expectations. As Beyond Meat expanded

its product line, its packaging evolved to more closely mimic traditional meat offerings. Similarly, Impossible Foods developed packaging that echoed that of traditional meat products when distributing the Impossible Burger to partner restaurants. One chef observed, “To me it’s unbelievable because when you get the package of the meat and you look at it, you have to take a double take because it looks like ground beef” (Rense 2018). These design choices reduced consumer’s experiential gap by presenting plant-based meat products in a familiar format. Figure 2 shows examples of product packaging used by both firms.

Emulating the Social Practices Associated with the Existing Category.

Both firms worked to overcome convenience hurdles, such as limited availability, and to dispel the perception of plant-based meat as a fringe choice by integrating their products into familiar retail and dining contexts (e.g., He et al. 2020). When Beyond Meat started distributing its products in grocery stores in 2013, it avoided placing the products in “what the company calls the ‘penalty box’ of the frozen vegetarian foods section” (Choi 2018). Consequently, when Beyond Burger launched in 2016, it was prominently displayed in the meat aisle of major grocery chains. This strategic placement was described as “the opening shot in our bid to transform the meat case into the protein case” (Guarino 2016) and “a foot in the door into the mainstream protein case where Americans buy their protein” (Heath 2016). Beyond Meat’s vice president of marketing said, “The fact that we are now on the main stage competing head to head with meat ... is tremendously validating” (Doering 2017), crediting the CEO’s persistence. CEO Ethan Brown insisted on placing the product in the meat aisle, stating that “if they weren’t going to put it in the meat case, we weren’t going to sell it to them” (Fox 2018).

Similarly, Impossible Foods introduced its Impossible Burger into high-end restaurants and advised chefs to list it alongside traditional meat dishes rather than labeling it as a veggie or vegan option. For example, at Momofuku Nishi, the Impossible Burger debuted on the lunch menu next to Chicken Katsu in the summer of 2016 and in another instance, next to an “authentically meaty Italian Dip brisket sandwich” (Rothman 2018). This placement not only signaled the product’s restaurant-quality appeal but also, normalized plant-based options for meat-eating clientele by integrating them seamlessly into existing shopping and dining experiences.

Summary. Both firms replicated key experiential dimensions integral to traditional meat, such as sensory attributes and consumption practices, to create experiential congruence (Rosa et al. 1999, Rindova and Petkova 2007, Bingham and Kahl 2013, Hsu and Grodal 2021). Tangible elements play an important role in shaping audience

Figure 2. (Color online) Product Packaging of Plant-Based Meat Products

(a)

Product name	Chicken-Free Strips	Beyond Meat Crumbles	Beast Burger	Beyond Burger	Beyond Sausage	Beyond Beef
Year of introduction	2012	2013	2015	2016	2017	2019
Placement in grocery stores	Frozen aisle	Frozen aisle	Frozen aisle	Meat aisle	Meat aisle	Meat aisle
Product packaging						

(b)

三明治 sandwiches

Pork Bun – hoisin, cucumber

Lobster Bun – avocado, lotus root chips

Impossible Burger* – 'Nishi style' & fries

add American cheese +1



Source: <https://www.organics.org/> (2017)

Source. (a) Beyond Meat website. (b) Momofuku menu (2016).

Notes. (a) Beyond Meat: Product packaging and store placement. (b) Impossible Foods: Product packaging and menu placement.

perceptions of novel offerings by bridging the gap between the new and the familiar, ensuring that innovations resonate with established expectations (Hargadon and Douglas 2001, Jones et al. 2012, Eisenman 2013, Delmestri and Greenwood 2016, Sgourev 2021). Our findings further suggest that these material elements not only evoke familiarity but also, reflect the embodied experiences of established categories, fostering cognitive and affective alignment (e.g., Rosa and Porac 2002, Rhee et al. 2017). This approach transcends the mere replication of physical and material attributes, placing greater emphasis on the sensory and emotional aspects of the lived experience of the category.

Furthermore, cooking and eating meat are deeply embedded in U.S. culture and social practices from hot dogs at baseball games to ribs at barbecues and turkey on Thanksgiving. To leverage these entrenched rituals, both firms integrated their plant-based meat products into familiar purchasing and consumption contexts, placing them alongside traditional meats in retail and dining settings as indistinguishable choices. This approach resonates with research on the role of place in shaping meanings and legitimation processes (Gieryn 2000, Lashley and Pollock 2020, David et al. 2023, Tunarosa 2023), reinforcing the view that categorization is both a cognitive and sociocultural process (Glynn and Navis 2013,

Durand et al. 2017). By aligning plant-based meat with the sensory attributes and consumption rituals of traditional meat, these firms embedded their products within established norms, advancing their efforts to reshape category meanings and expand its boundaries. This strategy facilitated direct comparisons with traditional meat, strengthening plant-based meat's competitive position in the broader meat market.

Strategy 3. Instilling Value Superiority

Our findings suggest that both firms enhanced their offerings' symbolic appeal by embedding distinct value propositions and aligning with practices typical of innovative categories, setting their products apart from traditional meat. This approach not only framed the new category positively, facilitating its legitimation, but also has the potential to influence the evaluative criteria through which audiences perceive and assess meat products.

Infusing Value Attributes into the New Category. Both firms infused a sense of superiority in the plant-based meat category by positioning their products as advancements or “upgrades” over traditional meat. For example, Beyond Meat's Chicken-Free Strips, launched in 2012, were marketed as a “humane protein upgrade”

that delivers the taste of real chicken “without the bad stuff,” like saturated fat or GMOs (Beyond Meat 2012). Its packaging also prominently emphasized the company’s commitment to “positively impacting climate change, conserving natural resources, and respecting animal welfare” (Gunther 2013). From its inception, Beyond Meat targeted pressing global issues, such as human health, climate change, resource depletion, and animal welfare, which CEO Ethan Brown referred to as the “four horsemen” of the company’s mission (Bockman 2015). Following a major salmonella outbreak in 2013, Ethan Brown emphasized Beyond Meat’s transparency in production, describing its offerings as “cleaner, healthier and more sustainable and humane” than traditional meat (Beyond Meat 2013). The launch of the Beast Burger reinforced this narrative with claims of higher protein and iron content (Beyond Meat 2014).

Impossible Foods similarly emphasized its commitment to creating foods that people love in ways that are healthier and more environmentally friendly. When introducing the Impossible Burger, the company pointed out its significant reduction in resource use and greenhouse gas emissions: “approximately a quarter of the water used to produce the same burger from a cow, a twentieth of the land, and only an eighth of the greenhouse gas emissions” (Impossible Foods 2016a). CEO Pat Brown emphasized that Impossible Foods could continuously improve, whereas “the cow is not going to get any better at being meat” (Swisher and Goode 2017). Over time, the company continued to promote the environmental and health benefits of its products, showcasing reduced greenhouse gas emissions and the absence of antibiotics and cholesterol (Brown 2018).

By highlighting health, sustainability, and animal welfare, both firms not only implicitly criticized the negative impacts of traditional meat on these issues but also, pointed out the absence of such benefits in traditional meat products. This approach encouraged audiences to reconsider the impact of traditional meat and to evaluate meat through these new benchmarks, thus facilitating the legitimation of plant-based meat as a superior option within the broader meat category.

Aligning with the Practices of an Innovative Category. Both firms adopted the operational ethos of technology companies, positioning themselves as pioneers of innovation in contrast to the outdated practices associated with the traditional meat industry. By focusing on innovation to disrupt the traditional meat industry, they made significant investments in research and development, moving away from typical food industry practices. Instead of launching fully developed products, these firms adopted a tech-centric approach of releasing progressively improved versions—referred to as “iterations” (Kowitt 2017). This not only attracted

venture capital, leading to successful funding rounds with high-profile investors, but also, projected an image of continuous advancement among the broader audiences. Such an innovative image reinforces the idea that traditional meat production methods are static and antiquated, appealing to forward-thinking consumers who value a departure from the status quo in their choices.

Prior to its IPO in 2019, Beyond Meat raised over \$140 million from prominent VC firms, such as Kleiner Perkins Caufield & Byers and the Obvious Corporation, as well as from Bill Gates. Twitter’s cofounder Biz Stone expressed his interest in investing in Beyond Meat: “They were coming at it from this big science, super practical, scalable angle. They were saying, ‘We want to get into the multibillion-dollar meat industry with a plant-based meat’” (Schwartz 2012). A partner at Kleiner Perkins Caufield & Byers stated that their investment in Beyond Meat aimed to address global challenges, like land and water usage, population growth, and supply chain pressures, which are “venture-scale problems with venture-scale returns” (Strom 2014, p. B1). Beyond Meat reinforced its innovative positioning when forming partnerships, such as during its 2019 collaboration with Carl’s Jr.: “It is with innovative and forward-looking partners, like Carl’s Jr., that we are building a brighter and more sustainable future” (Beyond Meat 2019a).

Impossible Foods CEO Pat Brown often criticized livestock production as “an antiquated technology” (Rusli 2014, p. B1), reinforcing the perception that traditional meat was rooted in outdated and harmful practices. He also framed plant-based meat products in Silicon Valley terms, describing them as a “platform to disrupt the international meat supply” (Soller 2016). By the end of 2018, Impossible Foods had raised nearly \$450 million from VC firms, like Google Ventures and Khosla Ventures, as well as from Bill Gates. A Khosla Ventures partner explained their investment as vital to creating a sustainable future, minimizing environmental impacts without compromising taste (Impossible Foods 2015). Reflecting Silicon Valley’s culture, the CEO noted, “Out here, you’re more appreciated if you’re doing something insanely ambitious, even if it doesn’t work” (Jacobsen 2017). In 2019, Impossible Foods debuted the Impossible Burger 2.0 at the Consumer Electronics Show, marking the first time that an edible product was featured at the event. CEO Pat Brown remarked on the company’s tech-driven vision: “We’re not just a technology company ... We are, right now, the most important technology company on earth” (Ip 2019).

By adopting the practices and ethos of the technology industry, both firms fostered an image of modernity and innovation for the plant-based meat category. This distanced them from the negative associations of traditional meat production while encouraging

audiences to view the category through the lens of technological progress. In doing so, these firms not only facilitated the legitimation of the category but also, potentially influenced audience expectations, setting new value benchmarks within the broader meat category.

Summary. Our findings demonstrate how both firms positioned the plant-based meat category as a technological solution to societal concerns linked to traditional meat consumption. To imbue the category with sociocultural meanings and strengthen legitimacy, they leveraged the metanarrative of the plant-based movement (Suddaby and Greenwood 2005, Ozcan and Gurses 2018). By emphasizing the category’s alignment with key societal values, such as health, sustainability, and animal welfare, they positioned plant-based meat as a direct response to contemporary concerns. This focus on value attributes acts as a form of theorization (Strang and Meyer 1993, Tolbert and Zucker 1996, Greenwood et al. 2002, Rao et al. 2003) using value-based rhetoric to address issues intrinsic to the existing category (Suddaby and Greenwood 2005). This approach not only facilitates the legitimation of the new category but also pressures incumbents because opposing it could be seen as rejecting solutions to urgent societal challenges (Vatin 2013). Additionally, by adopting practices typical of tech start-ups, these firms not only attracted venture capital backing but also, portrayed themselves as innovative and forward-thinking, contrasting with the outdated perceptions often associated with their incumbent counterparts. This emphasis on modernity and innovation is aligned with the firms’ focus on health, sustainability, and animal welfare, appealing to a growing forward-thinking demographic seeking a departure from the status quo.

Although this strategy does not directly undermine the traditional meat category, a “purpose-based category contaminates other product categories by making







them less valuable and less meaningful” (Arjaliès and Durand 2019, p. 19). As firms introduce considerations, such as addressing societal concerns and innovativeness, into the category, they subtly influence audience expectations and establish new benchmarks that may affect the evaluation of both the new and existing categories (Khaire and Wadhvani 2010, Zietsma et al. 2018, Hiatt and Carlos 2019, Sgourev 2021, Woolley et al. 2022). As Durand and Paoletta (2013) argue, “audience recognition (that) defines, or sets, which traits are common to which categorical identity and organize their expectations and evaluations of how well members of the set perform along these dimensions” (p. 1104). Consequently, the refined evaluative framework may lead audiences to reassess what they value in meat products, positioning plant-based meat as a superior and preferable option within the broader meat category.

Conceptual Overview

Table 4 presents a conceptual overview of the strategies that entrepreneurs used to legitimize the new plant-based meat category within the broader meat category despite its nonanimal origins. This summary provides a systematic comparison between the existing and new categories, illustrating how entrepreneurs skillfully leveraged cultural resources to construct relationships between the two categories during the new category’s legitimation process.

First, *reconfiguring the category basis* involves reframing the ontological assumptions of the existing category to assert membership within it. By explicitly challenging and reconceptualizing the core attributes of the existing category, market actors expand its boundaries, broadening what is considered part of the category. In the case of plant-based meat, this strategy fostered a more expansive meaning of meat, laying a solid foundation for claiming the meat identity and adopting the plant-based meat label. Second, *creating experiential*

Table 4. Conceptual Overview

Category elements	Incumbent category	New category	Actions	Strategies
Core attribute			Reframed	Reconfiguring the category basis
Feature A	A	A'	Replicated	Creating experiential congruence
Feature B	B	B'		
⋮	⋮	⋮		
Feature N	N	N'		
Value attribute X			Newly added	Instilling value superiority
Value attribute Y			Newly added	

congruence focuses on aligning the new category with the tangible and experiential attributes of the existing category. In the plant-based meat category, entrepreneurs replicated the material and sensory qualities of traditional meat and embedded these products into familiar consumption contexts to align with existing expectations of meat consumption. This seamless fit enabled direct comparability with traditional meat, positioning plant-based meat as an equivalent competitor. Third, *instilling value superiority* introduces value propositions that resonate with evolving social norms and expectations. For plant-based meat, entrepreneurs emphasized perceived benefits, such as superior sustainability, health advantages, and higher ethical standards, positioning their offerings as forward-thinking options to traditional meat. These claims and images elevated the perceived value of the category by introducing new evaluative dimensions within the broader meat category, potentially reshaping consumer expectations of what meat can offer. Our analysis does not establish a clear temporal order among the strategies as they were often employed concurrently. Instead, our findings suggest that these strategies worked in tandem to expand the boundaries of the meat category, collectively playing a crucial role in legitimizing the plant-based meat category as a viable competitor in the broader meat market.

Our analysis also highlights the interplay of these strategies. Drawing on Durand et al. (2007) on the notion of codes—assumptions defining consensus within a domain—we observe both code-violating and code-preserving actions. *Reconfiguring the category basis* reframes the foundational understandings of a category's core attributes, whereas *creating experiential congruence* mitigates the disruption of established expectations by aligning sensory features and consumption practices of the new and existing categories. Together, these strategies position the new category as a legitimate competitor. However, deciding which codes to challenge and which to maintain remains a critical decision (Pólos et al. 2002, Durand et al. 2007). In our context, consumers often distance themselves from the origins of meat, avoiding direct association with animals, while they remain intimately familiar with its taste, texture, and cooking practices. As Impossible Foods' CEO noted, consumers "love meat because of its flavor, its nutritional value, its convenience, its affordability—in spite of the fact that it's made from the corpse of an animal" (Choi 2018). Thus, although definitional codes signaling a category's fundamental nature may be revised, experiential codes tied to everyday experiences are often preserved to ensure acceptance and legitimacy.

Furthermore, although *reconfiguring the category basis* and *creating experiential congruence* expand the understating of the existing category and set the stage for direct comparison between the new and existing ones,

instilling value superiority is crucial for elevating the new category beyond parity. In the case of plant-based meat, this strategy shaped the perception that the category is both technically and morally superior to traditional meat, influencing how audiences assess the value and appeal of offerings within the broader meat category. However, despite the growing influence of sustainability and ethical considerations, primary drivers, like taste and convenience, remain dominant in food choices (Szejda et al. 2020). If these expectations are not adequately met, simply relying on value-based positioning may render the new category into a niche segment. Thus, these strategies work in concert; the first two lay the groundwork for establishing equivalence by broadening the cognitive boundaries of the existing category and offering comparable experiences, whereas the third leverages this foundation to differentiate the new category through superior value propositions, making all three essential for successful legitimation.

Nevertheless, several boundary conditions should be recognized that may limit the effectiveness of these legitimation strategies. First, *reconfiguring the category basis* risks diluting the category's meaning if the newly reframed ontological assumptions allow for too much interpretative flexibility. When a category's meaning becomes too broad, it could attract stakeholders with divergent interests, leading to conflicting interpretations and undermining efforts to establish a coherent collective understanding. This fragmentation can ultimately threaten the category's legitimacy and hinder its long-term viability (Lee et al. 2017, Lo et al. 2020, Lo and Rhee 2022). Additionally, reconfiguring the category basis is not equally feasible for all types of categories. More abstract or socially constructed categories tend to have greater flexibility, allowing for the reframing of their core attributes. In contrast, specific or natural categories, which are anchored in concrete, fixed characteristics, are much less adaptable. The ontological foundations of these categories are more rigid, making attempts to reframe them more difficult and less likely to succeed (Lakoff 1990, Rothbart and Taylor 1992).

Second, *creating experiential congruence* by emphasizing similarities with incumbent categories carries the risk of backfiring if the new category fails to meet the expectations associated with the existing categories. This approach relies on the audience perceiving the new category as offering comparable value. If the new category falls short, whether in terms of quality, experience, or performance, it can amplify perceptions of inauthenticity or "fakeness," not only damaging the new category's credibility but also, reinforcing the dominance of the existing category. Third, an overemphasis on normative attributes, such as sustainability or ethical benefits, in the strategy of *instilling value superiority* can inadvertently restrict the category to a niche market. For example, plant-based meat could be

perceived primarily as an ethical-choice product, limiting its appeal to consumers motivated by ideological concerns and reducing its ability to compete with traditional meat in the mainstream markets. Furthermore, the effectiveness of these legitimation strategies depends not only on market actors but also, on the reactions of other stakeholders, such as incumbents and regulatory agencies, who either facilitate or obstruct the new category's development. Although the primary focus of this study is not on these external actors, we acknowledge their influence and further address their roles in the Discussion and Conclusion section.

Relational Implications: Early Signs of Category Transmutation

An important insight from our findings is that all three legitimation strategies are inherently relational (Lo et al. 2020, Soublière et al. 2024). These strategies create connections and distinctions between the new and existing categories as market actors challenge established meaning systems while aligning with prevailing expectations within those systems. Because market actors seek to reconceptualize the incumbent category and simultaneously integrate the new category into the existing system, this process, when successful, can lead to changes in the broader category system. Specifically, as the new category gains legitimacy, it may reshape the understandings of its incumbent counterpart, potentially repositioning both the new and incumbent categories as subcategories within a broader category that retains the incumbent's category label. For example, the legitimation and growing acceptance of plant-based meat may expand the meaning of "meat," elevating it into a higher-order category⁸ encompassing both animal- and plant-based meat.⁹ Similarly, the legitimation of laboratory-grown diamonds has influenced the meaning and boundaries of the "diamond" category, which now officially includes both natural and laboratory-grown diamonds. These examples highlight the relational implications of legitimation strategies in potentially influencing the meaning and structure of existing category systems.

These insights motivated us to propose the notion of *category transmutation* to conceptualize this type of restructuring and to theorize the relational dynamics that drive changes within category systems. Transmutation, as defined by *Webster's Dictionary*, refers to a transformation in form or nature, often suggesting a progression to a higher level. In the context of category dynamics, this process involves the elevation of an existing category to a superordinate level, triggering a vertical reorganization of the category structure. Category transmutation differs from related concepts, such as category emergence, category expansion, or oppositional categories in two major ways. First, it involves

the new category possessing core attributes fundamentally distinct from its existing counterpart, requiring a reframing of the latter's ontological assumptions for both to coexist and compete in the same market space. Second, it leads to a vertical restructuring of the category system as the reshaped meaning of the incumbent category influences the relationships among categories. Thus, unlike other processes, category transmutation extends beyond a single category; it impacts multiple categories by altering their meanings and boundaries, initiating a vertical shift in the broader system. This phenomenon is not sufficiently captured by extant studies on category dynamics. For example, although satellite radio introduced a novel form of broadcasting, it did not alter the fundamental meaning of "radio" (Navis and Glynn 2010). Similarly, the rise of fair-trade chocolate added ethical considerations but did not reconceptualize the essence of "chocolate" (Woolley et al. 2022). Although factors, such as normative values, technological innovations, or aesthetic appeal (e.g., Krabbe and Grodal 2023), may convey the superiority of a new category and influence audience evaluations of both new and existing categories, these alone are insufficient to drive category transmutation. For a detailed comparison of category transmutation with related concepts, see Table 5.

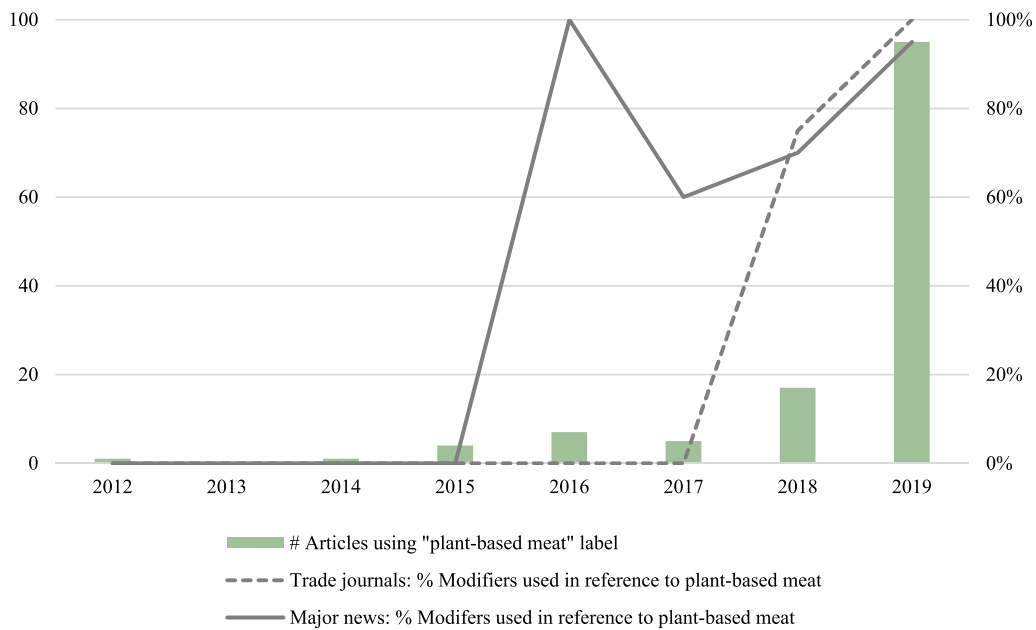
Although this study does not capture the complete transmutation of the meat category, which is beyond our temporal scope, we observe early signs of its development. One key indicator is the shift in presuppositions around meat (Hannan et al. 2019). As the plant-based meat category gains legitimacy, distinctions between animal-derived and plant-based meat are becoming more pronounced. A content analysis of major U.S. newspapers and industry publications shows an increasing use of modifiers, like "traditional" or "animal," to differentiate meat sources as illustrated in Figure 3. These findings indicate that animal-derived and plant-based meats may be increasingly recognized as distinct subcategories within the expanded meat category. This trend is particularly evident in industry publications, such as *Supermarket News*, which tend to be more receptive to new categories and more likely to use modifiers to differentiate between subcategories. In contrast, major newspapers use these modifiers less frequently and occasionally refer to plant-based products as "fake" or "faux" meat, reflecting both excitement and skepticism toward the new category. This difference likely suggests that different consumer segments, such as retailers and the general public, are experiencing perceptual shifts at varying rates. This is consistent with research showing that expert audiences, like those in retail, are quicker to recognize changing patterns and dynamics in categorization (e.g., Cudennec and Durand 2023). Figure 4 depicts how a full category transmutation might alter relationships within the meat category and illustrates

Table 5. Comparison of Related Concepts in Category Formation and Change

Comparative dimensions	Category emergence	Category creation	Oppositional category creation	Category elevation	Category expansion	Category nesting	Category transmutation
Definition	Categories emerge from elements external to an existing market	Categories are created by rearranging and reinterpreting existing components to create new meanings	Categories are created to counter an existing category by challenging its norms or values	The vertical extension and reclassification of an existing category results in an elevation of its status	A category's social or symbolic boundaries expand after its initial formation	A higher-order umbrella category is constructed to encompass product categories beneath it	The formation of a new category influences the meaning and boundaries of existing categories, leading to a vertical restructuring of the category system
Focus of theorization	Initial formation of a new category	Initial formation of a new category	Initial formation of a new oppositional category	Status change of a mature category	Expansion of a newly formed category	Initial formation of an umbrella category and subsequent nesting of existing categories	Initial formation of a new category and subsequent transformation in category system
Fundamental differences in core attributes from incumbent categories	Yes	No	No	No	N/A	N/A	Yes
Changes to the ontological assumptions of existing categories	No	No	No	No	No	No	Yes
Vertical (re-)structuring within the category system	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	Yes
Illustrative studies	Satellite radio (Navis and Glynn 2010); modern architecture (Jones et al. 2012)	Postcolonial fiction (Anand and Jones 2008)	Grass-fed beef (Weber et al. 2008); microbrewery (Carroll and Swaminathan 2000)	Italian spirit grappa (Delmestri and Greenwood 2016)	Nanotechnology (Wry et al. 2011, Grodal et al. 2015)	Quebec terroir (Boghossian and David 2021)	Laboratory-grown diamond; plant-based meat (this study)

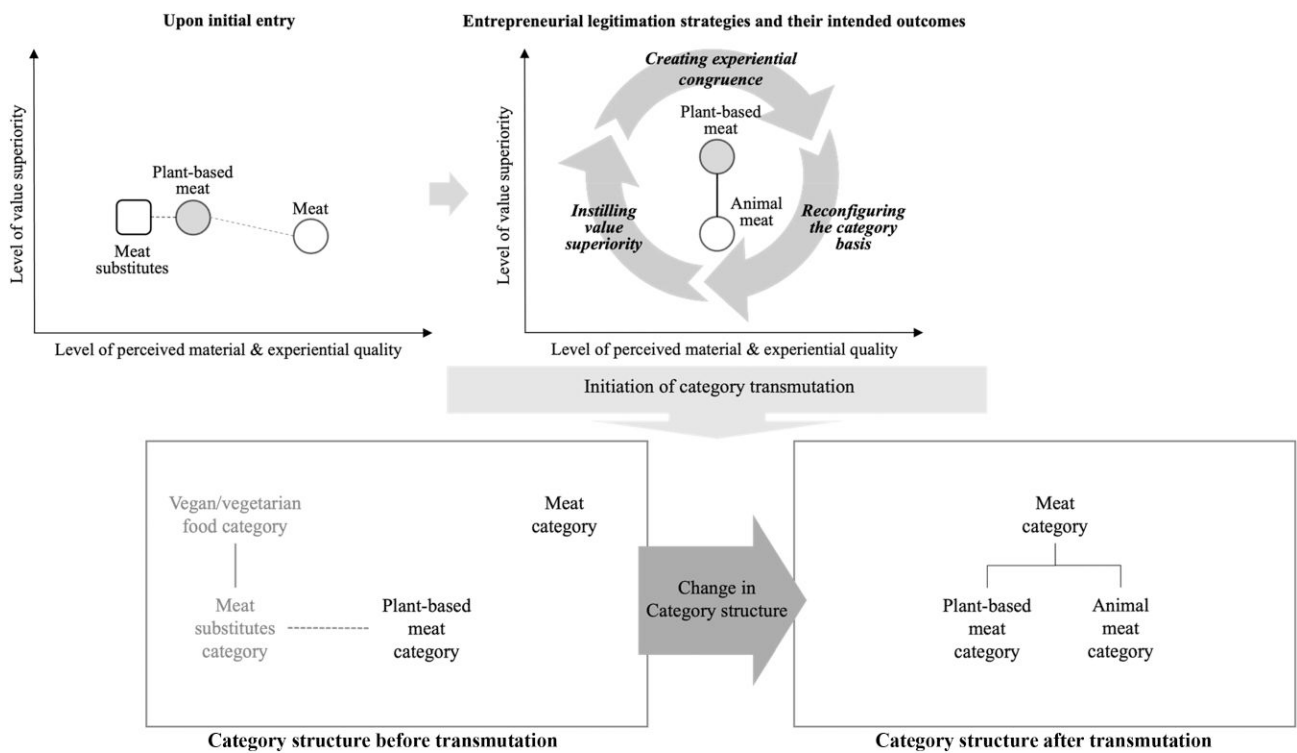
Note. N/A, not applicable.

Figure 3. (Color online) Proportion of Media Articles Using Modifiers to Describe Meat, 2012–2019



Note. Although our primary data collection concluded in April 2019, the figure includes data through the end of 2019 to reflect ongoing changes in perceptions that signal the initiation of category transmutation extending beyond the original time frame of our study.

Figure 4. Illustrative Example of Category Transmutation in the Meat Category



Notes. Although the legitimization strategies that we identify do not directly involve the meat substitutes category, we have included it in this figure for illustrative purposes as the inclusion of the meat substitutes category helps to highlight how the plant-based meat category dissociates itself from the existing meat substitutes category. Dotted lines indicate a weaker association between categories compared with solid lines, which indicate a stronger association.

how this transformation can be triggered as the new category gains acceptance through the legitimation strategies that we identify.

The transmutation of categories embedded in cognitive schemas and daily practices is a complex process, often unfolding gradually and difficult to track. Identifying categories undergoing transmutation involves detecting subtle shifts in conventional understandings of established categories, such as through changes in the labels used to describe them, which are often first observable in media narratives and adjustments in categorization systems used by different market actors. These shifts may also manifest tangibly, such as in changes in product placements in retail settings. We observe this gradual process in categories like cameras, where both film and digital types are recognized, and in the milk category, where consumers are routinely offered choices between regular (cow's) milk and plant-based options, like oat, almond, rice, or soy. Similarly, in the investment sector, socially responsible investment funds have expanded the concept of investment to include both profit generation and the pursuit of positive social change (Yan et al. 2019), whereas the automotive industry increasingly distinguishes between internal combustion engine vehicles and electric vehicles. Although the pace of category transmutation can range from gradual evolutions to rapid transformations, the common thread is that as new categories gain legitimacy, they prompt the reconceptualization of traditional categories, potentially leading to vertical restructuring that repositions both traditional and new categories as subcategories within a broadened category framework.

Although our study and recent examples suggest that the successful legitimation of a new category might set the stage for category transmutation, external forces also play a significant role in shaping this process. Regulatory interventions, such as the European Union's mandate for zero-emission vehicles by 2035, or shifts in consumer preferences driven by evolving societal values or technological advancements can accelerate or redirect the course of category transmutation. Additionally, even after the onset of transmutation, various stakeholders can influence its trajectory by policing category boundaries, potentially stalling or reversing the process. Moreover, focusing on the initial periods of category transmutation raises questions about its long-term development (Granqvist and Ritvala 2016, Lo et al. 2020). The vertical modifications to the category structure may be temporary, with the category system potentially consolidating again as the landscape continues to evolve. For example, if electric vehicles eventually replace internal combustion engine cars entirely, the distinction between these categories could fade, eliminating the need for subcategories and collapsing the category structure back into a single

level (see Arjaliès and Durand 2019). Similarly, the relatively weak symbolic boundaries between plant-based meat and animal meat categories because of their close positioning within the broader meat category might lead to unintended consequences (Sikavica and Pozner 2013, Hsu and Grodal 2021). In the case of e-cigarettes, for instance, the stigma associated with traditional cigarettes transferred to e-cigarettes due to their close alignment in stakeholder perceptions, a result of successful initial legitimation (Hsu and Grodal 2021). Although the metanarrative of the broader plant-based movement may protect plant-based meat from similar negative associations, the long-term implications of these weak boundaries remain uncertain, raising questions about the stability of category transmutation in this context.

Discussion and Conclusion

Although existing research on category dynamics has significantly advanced our understanding of how new categories form and evolve, it often falls short in explaining how market actors establish new categories that challenge the foundational understandings of existing ones while simultaneously positioning them as legitimate competitors. Yet, innovations like plant-based meat, which directly contest the ontological assumptions of the meat category (its animal origins), are increasingly influencing what it means to belong to a category, necessitating a deeper understanding of how such categories gain legitimacy within established category systems. The legitimation strategies observed in the plant-based meat category, along with the concept of category transmutation introduced in this study, make important contributions to the literatures on category dynamics, cultural entrepreneurship, and market moralization.

First, this research enhances our understanding of categories and categorization by demonstrating how the strategic actions of market actors not only legitimize new categories but also, impact adjacent categories and the broader category system. These strategies are relational; as entrepreneurs legitimize the new category by selectively transforming and preserving key aspects of the established category, they also influence its meaning and how audiences perceive the incumbent category. This study suggests that category formation is not a discrete or isolated incidence but an interconnected process that may induce changes in intercategory relationships and potentially reshape the broader category system. In doing so, we extend the relational perspective on category dynamics (Lo et al. 2020, Soublière et al. 2024), offering a more nuanced understanding of how categories coevolve. Additionally, our findings extend research on oppositional categories. Prior studies have shown that oppositional

categories differentiate from established counterparts by emphasizing superior normative values (Carroll and Swaminathan 2000, Rao et al. 2003, Weber et al. 2008, Woolley et al. 2022). Our findings further illustrate that entrepreneurial efforts to actively reframe the foundational understandings of an existing category, beyond simply asserting value superiority, can transcend niche positioning to directly challenge incumbents by altering category meanings and expanding its boundaries.

These insights also have implications for research on strategic categorization (Pontikes 2012, Pontikes and Kim 2017, Pontikes 2018, Barlow et al. 2019, Pontikes and Rindova 2020). Our findings show that market actors are not limited to strategically positioning new categories within established category systems; they may also alter the meanings, boundaries, and evaluative criteria of existing categories (Kennedy and Fiss 2013), reshaping the competitive landscape to their advantage (Gavetti et al. 2017, Pontikes and Rindova 2020). Although we did not explicitly demonstrate how market actors' efforts to influence audience evaluations lead to changes in evaluative criteria, prior research shows that they can act as "valuation entrepreneurs" (Zuckerman 2012, Sgourev 2021), influencing the prevailing evaluative principles by which categories and their offerings are assessed. For instance, Vinokurova (2019) showed how firms in the U.S. mortgage-backed securities market influenced customer preferences by modifying product performance dimensions, whereas Raffaelli (2019) illustrated how Swiss watchmakers redefined "both the meanings and values associated with the legacy technology and the boundaries of the market for that technology" (Raffaelli 2019, p. 576). Building on these studies, our research provides new insights into how actors can influence category evolution, not only by "propos[ing] new meanings that fold elements of existing ontologies in on each other" to create and legitimate new categories (Kennedy and Fiss 2013, p. 1146) but also, by influencing the trajectory of established categories through changes to their meanings, boundaries, and evaluation criteria. In doing so, we respond to the call for an ontological turn in category research (Kennedy and Fiss 2013) and extend this line of inquiry by offering a novel perspective for advancing the study of strategic categorization.

Second, our study enriches the cultural entrepreneurship literature by demonstrating its broader applications beyond the traditional focus on garnering audience support and gaining legitimacy. We take a more expansive view of culture, seeing it as a set of cultural repertoires that entrepreneurs can strategically mobilize to selectively preserve, modify, or challenge existing category meanings (Giorgi et al. 2015, Soublière and Lockwood 2022). In doing so, we respond to the call of Lounsbury and Glynn (2019) to consider the macrofoundational

aspects of cultural entrepreneurship, illustrating how actors can "configure and reconfigure bundles of meanings and practices that situate identity positions in and across institutional fields" (Lounsbury and Glynn 2019, p. 60). Our study also extends this literature's focus on narrative and storytelling by showing how entrepreneurs use both symbolic and material cultural resources to construct multiple dimensions of a category, including its cognitive, material, experiential, and normative attributes, all of which are critical to the legitimation process (Meyer et al. 2013, Delmestri and Greenwood 2016, Höllerer et al. 2018, Lashley and Pollock 2020, Hsu and Grodal 2021, Krabbe and Grodal 2023). Moreover, we show how entrepreneurs go beyond achieving resonance by acting as "cultural challengers" who guide audience meaning making (Soublière and Lockwood 2022) by reframing the ontological assumptions of categories. In doing so, they may influence category boundaries and structures, suggesting the transformative potential of cultural entrepreneurship, including the possibility of category transmutation.

Third, this study offers important insights into market moralization, a field concerned with how markets imbued with social and moral values grow and achieve mainstream acceptance (Georgallis and Lee 2020, Hedberg and Lounsbury 2021). Our findings show how market actors can position value-laden innovations not as niche offerings but as legitimate competitors to incumbent products by strategically reframing the ontological assumptions about established categories. Rather than relying solely on the promotion of superior values, these actors create a conceptual space for new entrants by challenging foundational understandings of what constitutes category membership and by ensuring experiential congruence with existing categories to facilitate acceptance and legitimation. These strategies expand category boundaries, positioning new offerings as functionally equivalent yet distinct in their moral superiority. This reframing prompts audiences to reconsider what they value within a category, potentially leading certain audience segments to favor the morally superior option. Importantly, these strategies extend beyond altering consumer perceptions and preferences, carrying the potential to moralize the market itself and drive shifts in societal values. Our findings thus offer a novel perspective on how value-laden categories can achieve mainstream acceptance. This insight contributes to ongoing debates about the role of markets in tackling grand societal challenges by offering a potential pathway for scaling social innovations and responding to growing calls for systematic changes.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

We recognize several limitations that offer avenues for future research. First, although we focused on identifying common activities between two entrepreneurial

firms, future research could explore the distinctiveness of their strategies and their implications on the category's trajectory as well as firm-level outcomes (Nelson 2025). Interestingly, despite seemingly aligned approaches, we did not observe much collective action, diverging from previous studies that demonstrate collaboration during the early stages of category formation (Navis and Glynn 2010, Hiatt and Park 2022). Our case seems to exemplify how "individual actors may successfully form a market by pursuing their own interests without coordinating with other actors" (Lee et al. 2018, p. 245). For instance, Beyond Meat targeted grocery stores and fast-food chains, whereas Impossible Foods initially focused on upscale restaurants and celebrity endorsements.¹⁰ Their independent actions nonetheless both challenged incumbents and influenced conventional category perceptions, leading to their recognition as competitors within the expanded category in the media discourse (Kennedy 2008, Lee et al. 2018, Harmon et al. 2023). Future research could examine how such independent actions collectively contribute to the formation and legitimation of new market categories, moving beyond the typical collaboration-then-competition model often seen in category development (Navis and Glynn 2010). This could offer valuable insights into the broader implications of different approaches for both market actors and category dynamics.

Second, although our focus on entrepreneurial actors aligns with our research question, it limits our understanding of how other stakeholders shape category evolution. Stakeholder dynamics, particularly among those with vested interests, can significantly influence a category's development (McKendrick et al. 2003, Sikavica and Pozner 2013, Hsu and Grodal 2021). Incumbents may hinder new entrants by leveraging market power or lobbying to reinforce established category boundaries (Zietsma et al. 2018, Georgallis et al. 2019), or they may join the market themselves, affecting its trajectory. For instance, Sikavica and Pozner (2013) found that the success of organic farming attracted incumbents, threatening the economic viability of original category members. Similarly, Hiatt and Carlos (2019) showed how category expansion in the U.S. biodiesel market led to framing contests among stakeholders. Yet, incumbent involvement may sometimes paradoxically accelerate new category growth. Hedberg and Lounsbury (2021) noted that incumbent organizations can help scale new moral categories, and Hiatt and Park (2022) found how resistance from incumbents can spur collective action among new category members.

Although a full investigation of stakeholder reactions is beyond the scope of this study, our empirical evidence reveals some of these dynamics, including the FDA's regulatory scrutiny and organized resistance from industry groups. We also observed contrasting

incumbent responses. Tyson Foods, a major producer of traditional meat, introduced its own plant-based meat products in 2019, which validated the coexistence of both subcategories within the meat category. In contrast, meat ranchers, more directly tied to animal-based meat production, actively resisted the potential redefinition of meat. For instance, in 2018, the U.S. Cattleman's Association lobbied for stricter definitions of meat, and Missouri legally defined meat as "any edible portion of livestock or poultry carcass or part thereof" (The Shelby Report 2018). Understanding these divergent reactions could illuminate the conditions under which incumbents act as catalysts or barriers to category legitimation and evolution, offering a promising direction for future research.

Future research may also explore the roles of market intermediaries, such as critics, industry associations, accreditation agencies (Lee et al. 2017), and regulatory bodies (Ozcan and Gurses 2018, Klopff et al. 2024), in facilitating or impeding category legitimation. Regulatory environments, exemplified by the European Union's stricter rules and the proposed federal bill in the United States aiming to restrict the use of meat labels to animal-based products (U.S. House 2019), can significantly shape category trajectories (Tharchen and Garud 2023). Taken together, this calls for a more comprehensive examination of stakeholder interactions and the politics of category legitimation (Hiatt and Carlos 2019, Slavich et al. 2020, Hiatt and Park 2022) as well as investigations into how entrepreneurs, both individually and collectively, navigate stakeholder resistance and market conditions in their pursuit of legitimation.

Finally, although we observe some early indicators of category transmutation, we acknowledge that this process is still in its earliest stages in our context. By introducing category transmutation, we aim to highlight the relational implications of category legitimation and propose a theoretical construct for scholars studying the dynamics of the broader category system rather than individual categories. We encourage future research to more comprehensively investigate the process and outcomes of category transmutation through longitudinal studies across diverse contexts. Understanding whether and how such restructuring takes shape requires tracking shifts in audience perceptions and changes to category boundaries over extended periods. Researchers could examine how different stakeholder groups vary in their recognition and acceptance of new subcategories and explore how distinct speeds and trajectories of transmutation reflect various institutional conditions, competitive pressures, or legitimation strategies.

Conclusion

This study offers important insights into how market actors legitimize new categories with fundamentally

different core attributes from existing ones while simultaneously striving to compete within the same market space. Our findings show that entrepreneurs navigate this dilemma by strategically leveraging both symbolic and material cultural resources to reframe the ontological assumptions of the established category, align key experiential dimensions, and promote superior value propositions. These strategies not only position their offerings as legitimate competitors but also, have the potential to influence the meaning and boundaries of established categories, possibly initiating the process of category transmutation. Although full transmutation in the meat industry may take decades, if it happens at all, early signs suggest a gradual recognition of both plant-based and traditional meat as part of an expanded meat category. More broadly, this research demonstrates how the legitimation of a new category might have far-reaching effects, reshaping market dynamics and contributing to shifts in societal values. We encourage future research to explore how new categories that challenge conventional understandings of core attributes in existing categories—particularly those driven by technological innovations aimed at addressing societal challenges—are legitimized and mainstreamed within established category systems and how their legitimation might reshape market structures and contribute to positive societal changes.

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Endnotes

¹ We refer to the vertical, nested structure of categories or the taxonomic relationships that arrange them hierarchically from the general (superordinate) to specific (subordinate) categories (e.g., Boghossian and David 2021) rather than their status-based hierarchy (e.g., Delmestri and Greenwood 2016).

² According to the U.S. Federal Trade Commission (FTC), the previous definition of a diamond was “a natural mineral consisting essentially of pure carbon crystallized in the isometric system.” In 2018, the FTC revised its Jewelry Guides to officially include laboratory-grown diamonds within the definition of diamonds. By 2023, laboratory-grown diamonds accounted for more than 17% of the total diamond market (Pearl 2023).

³ Additionally, in early 2020, the coronavirus disease 2019 pandemic caused significant disruptions in the meat supply chain, leading to a surge in plant-based meat sales, which further justifies our decision to conclude data collection in 2019.

⁴ Recognizing the politically charged connotations of plant-based meat (Yule and Cummings 2023) and the potential influence of media ideology on its coverage, we used well-established bias ratings, like AllSides and Media Bias/Fact Check (Sparks and Hmielowski 2023). Analysis of five major newspapers identified three as left leaning and two as centrist or right leaning. Local newspapers showed a balanced ideological distribution, whereas industry news outlets lacked bias ratings, reflecting their focus on specialized information.

⁵ Podcasting is similar to other audio media, such as radio, but differs in its reliance on the internet for distribution and its on-demand, flexible consumption model (Llinares et al. 2018). Twenty-two percent of Americans listened to podcasts weekly, averaging seven episodes per week (Edison Research 2019).

⁶ Interviewees answered semistructured questions covering their experiences, major obstacles, and insights into market development, with each interview lasting about 30 minutes on average.

⁷ Incorporated as “J. Green Natural Foods Co.” in 2011, the company changed its name to “Savage River, Inc.” later that year and then, to “Beyond Meat, Inc.” in September 2018.

⁸ Many instances of category formation do not change the meaning of existing categories. For example, despite grass-fed beef being valued for its naturalness and sustainability, its introduction has not altered the fundamental meaning of *beef* (Weber et al. 2008). Similarly, although microbreweries are viewed as a specialty beer segment within the beer industry, they have not changed the overarching meaning of *beer* (Carroll and Swaminathan 2000, p. 731).

⁹ This suggests a reorganization of how categories are perceived in relation to each other without necessarily suggesting changes to their sociocultural status hierarchy.

¹⁰ This difference was partly because of the longer regulatory approval process required for Impossible Foods’ products that contained soy leghemoglobin, which necessitated more extensive safety evaluations before they could be sold in grocery stores.

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