

Downfall of Jell-O salad: Boundary spanning and a shift in taste

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Summary

Combining recent work on market categories with a historical perspective, this study examines how broader cultural frames can shape boundary spanning rules—taste for variety and atypicality, and a shift in the rules. Focusing on Jell-O salad, an American dish that is known to mix all sorts of food in aspic and had been popular until the 1970s, this article traces how this salad dish that used to be accepted as a delicious mixture of distinct food (variety) has become seen as a disgusting blend traversing established categories of food (atypicality). Using 247 Jell-O package inserts, recipe books, pamphlets, and magazine advertisements between 1905 and 2005, the present study employs a mixed method approach: a historical process analysis and an event count analysis of the prevalence of Jell-O salad. Results show that the salad is no longer interpreted as a dish serving a variety of favorite food items because the main ingredient, powdered gelatin or Jell-O, has become available to all and dissociated with middle-class cultural frames. The results challenge an implicit assumption of the boundary spanning rules; once a mixture is considered an assortment, it tends to be favorably seen as a creative mix not an atypical hybrid. By evidencing how changes in the relationships between food and cultural frames affect the taste for variety, this study advances current understandings of category spanning and crossing social dichotomies of food.

Theoretical framework

Recent category scholarship highlights two rules of boundary spanning: variety—a tendency to embrace multiple categories at the same time, and atypicality—a tendency to blend elements from each of these categories (Goldberg, Hannan, & Kovács, 2016). The main difference between variety and atypicality depends on the compliance with category codes (Hsu, Hannan, & Koçak, 2009; Phillips, Turco, & Zuckerman, 2013;

Phillips & Zuckerman, 2001). For instance, many people see a buffet lunch as an opportunity to try various kinds of food, not expecting some hybrid food. In contrast, most people do not feel sure about a Jamaican-Japanese fusion that defies the codes of typical Jamaican food (e.g., jerk chickens) as well as Japanese food (e.g., sushi and sashimi). The taste for variety applies when they go to buffet restaurants, not fusion eateries. Similarly, the taste for atypicality applies when they order the Jamaican-Japanese fusion dish not a buffet lunch. As these examples suggests, market audience values which rule should apply to which product when they choose products.

While category research has paid attention to crossing boundaries and its consequences, it implicitly assumes that the boundary spanning rules remain the same regardless of social changes (Sgourea & Althuisen, 2014). If market audiences view a hybrid product as an assortment of multiple ingredients, the product is constantly viewed in that way. Similarly, once a collection of items is considered a hybrid transgressing distinct boundaries between the items, its atypical-ness never changes and tends to be continuously penalized (Hannan, Polos, & Carroll, 2007; Zuckerman, 1999). However, it is important to note that categorical boundaries as well as boundary spanning practices are embedded in broader cultural frames (McCammon, Muse, Newman, & Terrell, 2007; Tuchman & Levine, 1995). When a product becomes associated with different cultural values, thereby providing different meanings, market audiences may no longer consider the same product what it used to be. This suggests the possibility of changes in how they see the same product over time. Thus, the present study begins by asking a question that is largely missing in the current literature, *how do cultural frames shape and change the boundary spanning rules?*

Jell-O salad

To answer the question above, this study attends to an American dish, Jell-O salad, in association with cultural frames in the United States from 1905 to 2005. Jell-O salad is a jelly made with lime-flavored Jell-O, set in a mold, containing any kind of meat, seafood, eggs, vegetables and fruits, and decorated with mayonnaise or cream frosting. The key ingredient of this salad is the flavored powdered gelatin, Jell-O, which was manufactured and sold by the Genesee Pure Foods Company since 1900. Jell-O was initially associated with the American middle-class values. Refrigerators to set gelatin

became available to middle-class families. Besides, it was advertised as a product used by finest hotels and restaurants (Genesee Pure Foods Company, 1902). Jell-O salad had been popular since the 1900s and until the 1970s. It was featured in numerous cookbooks and its deliciousness was touted by ladies magazines (see Figure 1). Despite being loved by Americans for more than half a century, Jell-O salad is now an object of ridicule and even the idea of salmon and olives in jelly disgusts ordinary people today. The dramatic change in the audience reaction to Jell-O salad provides an ideal setting to investigate changes in the boundary spanning rules in association with culture frames over time.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Contributions

This study examines how market audiences who once saw a certain dish as a creative way of enjoying multiple kinds of morsels at once (taste for variety), now view the same dish as a coalescent glop defying established boundaries of food categories (taste for atypicality). It contributes to the existing literature on market categories by evidencing a drastic change in the boundary spanning rules over time. By challenging the implicit assumption of the rules as a constant, it helps us better understand audience reaction to mixing categories. The present study also advances the literature by highlighting social effects on interpreting category crossing. It shows how a certain dish becomes divorced from certain cultural frames and thereby affects audience interpretation of its “mixed” ingredients. Lastly, it has implications for understanding pure versus impure dichotomies in food. Jell-O was once perceived as pure so was the salad. However, as Jell-O has been dissociated from the middle-class culture that encourages omnivorous consumption, Jell-O salad becomes considered processed and unpalatable. Taken together, this study complements the growing literature on boundary spanning in food consumption, and contributes to our understanding of relationships between cultural frames and changes in the boundary spanning rules.

References

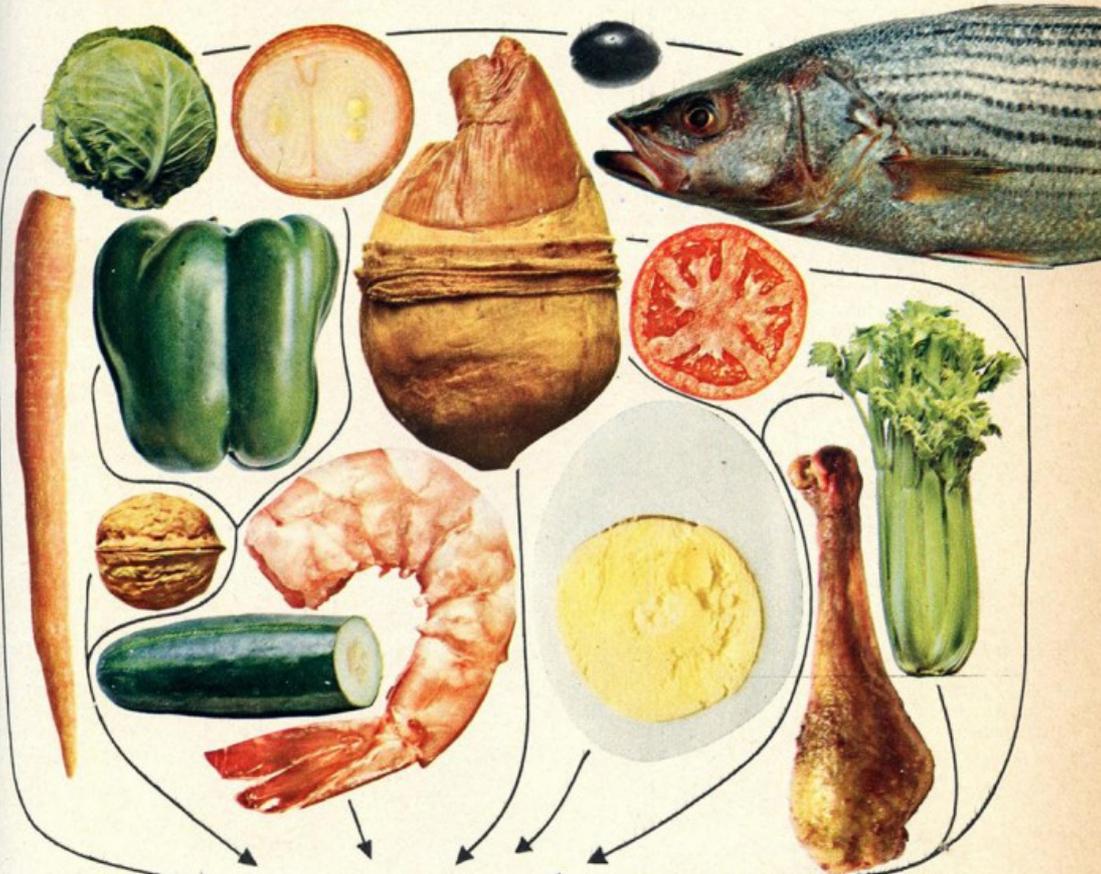
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Figure 1. Jell-O Salad Advertisement

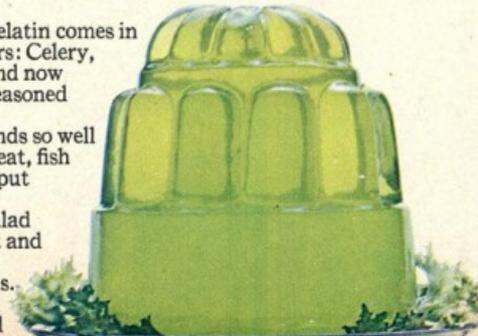
Now that Jell-O® has put salad flavors into gelatin



...you can put anything into gelatin salads.



New Jell-O Salad Gelatin comes in four real salad flavors: Celery, Mixed Vegetable, and now Italian Salad and Seasoned Tomato. That's why it blends so well with the tastes of meat, fish and vegetables you put in salads. Get new Jell-O Salad Gelatin, it's the first and only gelatin created exclusively for salads. You'll never again make a gelatin salad that's a dessert at heart.



5¢ 09-002 STORE COUPON 5¢

5¢ OFF ON TWO PACKAGES OF JELL-O SALAD GELATIN

MR. GROCER: Jell-O Division will redeem this coupon for 5¢ plus 2¢ for handling, if you received it on your sale of any 2 packages of Jell-O Salad Gelatin Mix. For payment, present it to your Jell-O Division representative, or mail it to General Foods Coupon Redemption Office, P.O. Box 103, Kankakee, Illinois. Coupon may not be assigned or transferred by you. Invoice proving purchase of sufficient Jell-O Salad Gelatin Mix to cover coupons presented for redemption must be shown upon request. Customer must pay any sales tax. Void where prohibited, taxed or restricted by law. Good only in U.S.A. Cash value 1/20¢. General Foods Corp. Offer limited to one coupon per purchase.

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