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Recognizing, evaluating, and selecting new ideas: the problematic journey of novelty

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ABSTRACT

The journey of novelty – from the moment it arises to the time it takes hold – is often a difficult one. Life outside the mainstream is harsh, and social objects (e.g. ideas, products, technologies, or organisational forms) that lie off the beaten path tend to be overlooked. In this special issue, we bring together research which deepens our understanding of how novelty and new ideas get recognised, evaluated, and selected. The different articles and essays in this special issue not only shed fresh light on the underlying mechanisms that govern how the new surfaces, takes root, and propagates but also push our scholarly thinking in new and exciting research directions.

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Introduction

The journey of a novel idea is akin to the journey of a river through a diverse landscape – winding, unpredictable, and sometimes vanishing only to reappear in the most unexpected places. In its infancy, novelty is like a bubbling spring: pure and promising, yet with an uncertain path ahead. Skepticism and resistance often act as barriers, like boulders and fallen trees, impeding the flow of innovative thinking. Organizations adept at navigating these challenges can harness the stream of novelty, directing its force to redefine the contours of their industries. However, mastering these rough currents is no simple task. There is often an innate reluctance to embrace the *novel*, largely because it frequently results from unpredictable processes that are unlikely to yield significant rewards (March, 2010). Favorable novelty typically arises from unique combinations of basic elements, yet such unconventional blends are uncommon and, when they do occur, the outcomes are more frequently negligible or adverse rather than transformative. This underscores the complex nature of innovation and the daunting odds innovators face as they attempt to break new ground (Cattani et al., 2017).

Not surprisingly, history is littered with examples where seasoned professionals, in a notable lapse of judgement, have overlooked novel ideas that eventually emerged as

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groundbreaking successes. Take, for instance, the case of the Pontiac Fiero sports car, which was initially dismissed but later became a sensation that captivated the public's imagination (Pinchot, 1985). Similarly, Hewlett-Packard failed to recognise the potential of the personal computer in the seventies when Steve Wozniak, who back then was still working for the company, proposed the idea to the management on five occasions (Ong, 2010). The world of creative industries is teeming with comparable narratives. Iconic films and TV shows such as *Star Wars* and *The Squid Game* were initially turned down by executives who could not grasp their potential, only to see these projects thrive spectacularly when embraced by others. These misjudgements highlight a puzzling phenomenon where groundbreaking ideas are often trivialised as uncreative by decision-makers – a perplexing issue that Mueller et al. (2018) describe as an unresolved enigma with far-reaching implications. Moreover, the process of bringing new ideas to fruition often necessitates extensive and sometimes painful changes, incurring significant costs (Deichmann & Jensen, 2018; Perry-Smith & Mannucci, 2017). This reality adds another layer of complexity to the already challenging task of innovation, underscoring the courage and stubbornness required to transform novel concepts into tangible, impactful realities.

Compounding the issue is the lack of consensus around what novelty truly means and how to recognise it (Bavato, 2022; Litchfield et al., 2015; Rosenkopf & McGrath, 2011). Evaluating novelty is often subjective and context-dependent – you simply know it when you see it (Hua et al., 2022). Recognition and evaluation of novelty thus become highly contingent on the specific circumstances and the perceptual lenses of the evaluators. Additionally, evaluators may exhibit biases such as favouring ideas from familiar sources or those that align closely with their own experiences and backgrounds, thus perpetuating in-group preferences (Nemeth, 1986; Reitzig & Sorenson, 2013).

Given these complexities, a deeper understanding of how new ideas are recognised, evaluated, and selected is critical for nurturing the seeds of future growth and sustainability. As industries and societies evolve, the ability to identify and integrate new ideas becomes a crucial determinant of success. Further scholarly research is required to elucidate the mechanisms by which novelty gains traction, not only to advance academic understanding but also to provide practical insights that can aid organisations and policymakers in fostering environments conducive to innovation and progress. Such an understanding is crucial for harnessing the full potential of novelty and directing it towards constructive societal evolution.

This special issue brings together an ensemble of scholars whose diverse contributions enrich our grasp of the complex process of recognising, evaluating, and selecting novelty across a variety of contexts. Their collective insights unveil the critical starting point in the marathon of innovation – the initial spark where new ideas must captivate and convince discerning audiences to gain traction and flourish. Each contribution is a window into the rich academic dialogue that enhances our comprehension of novelty's lifecycle – from its initial spark to its eventual rooting and expansion.

Different angles on recognising, evaluating, and selecting novelty

In 2020, when we organised a track at EGOS in Hamburg focused on the selection and evaluation of new ideas, we hardly anticipated it would spark a series of initiatives,

Table 1. Links between articles and themes.

	Recognition	Evaluation	Selection
Just et al.	*	*	
Baer and Zhang		*	*
Chen et al.	*		*
Heiman and Hurmelinna-Laukkanen	*		
Mannucci and Perry-Smith	*		
Falchetti et al.		*	

catalysing a dynamic and expanding circle of researchers fascinated by the emergence of novelty in its various organisational and market forms. This initial gathering set the stage for a succession of tracks at EGOS in Amsterdam (2021), Vienna (2022), and Cagliari (2023) – along with a dedicated volume in *Research in the Sociology of Organizations* (see Cattani et al., 2022) – and a PDW at the Academy of Management in Boston (2023). It all culminated in this special issue. Each step along the way has underscored the enduring appeal of this area of research, drawing together a vibrant community of scholars united by their interest in investigating how the new surfaces, takes root, and propagates.

For this special issue, following a general call, we selected 6 papers. These thought-provoking articles and essays explore novelty across various analytical levels (from individual actors to groups and whole organisations), theoretical perspectives, and methodological orientations. Each piece gravitates around one or more of the three thematic pillars of the special issue: the recognition, evaluation, or selection of novel ideas. Table 1 outlines the connection between each article and these themes, based on our interpretation of the contributions of each paper, with the caveat that such grouping is necessarily arbitrary and is only meant to serve as a general guide. Individually, each article contributes fresh insights that enhance our understanding of how novelty operates within different contexts. Together, they weave a rich tapestry of scholarship that not only deepens our grasp of the subject but also heralds new directions for inquiry.

Below, we provide a summary of the core arguments presented in each paper, aiming to inspire readers to explore the depths of these scholarly works further. Following these summaries, we outline what we perceive as important research trajectories that should shape future explorations in the fields of novelty recognition, evaluation, and selection across both organisational and market settings. Our goal is to spark curiosity and motivate continued academic pursuit in these vital areas of study, pushing the boundaries of what we know and how we think about innovation and change.

The articles in this special issue

The paper ‘*AI-based novelty detection in crowdsourced idea spaces*’ by Just, Ströhle, Füller, and Hutter takes a close look at different AI-based language models that may be helpful in automating the coding of novelty, based on textual data about ideas. The authors argue that it is increasingly challenging for idea evaluators to deal with and read through an enormous pile of ideas that is generated in, for instance, crowdsourcing initiatives. Not only does manual evaluation require substantial resources and effort, but it can also lead to biased estimations. By studying a set of crowdsourced ideas, they compare different AI-based language models (Doc2Vec, SBERT, and GPT-3-based Ada Similarity) and the novelty scores these models generate. In addition,

Just et al. compare these scores with evaluations that experts generated for the same set of ideas. They find that all AI-based language model novelty scores correlate with human novelty evaluations, but they also find important differences and limitations of the AI-based language models that are worth considering. For example, they show that the idea reference frame or the length of processed text can significantly influence the algorithm-generated novelty scores. Just and colleagues conclude that, at the moment, the full automation of the novelty evaluation task may not be recommendable. At the same, they also suggest that AI-based language models are useful to complement and fine-tune human novelty assessments as they can help evaluators, for instance, shortlist novel idea submissions and thus increase evaluator's attention space for novelty.

Continuing the conversation on idea evaluation, in *'Discerning creativity: a group process perspective on idea selection'*, Baer and Zhang highlight how not only individuals but also groups struggle to identify creative ideas. To combat different biases and challenges that groups have when having to evaluate and select creative ideas from a pool of ideas, Baer and Zhang advocate for the use of a structured group process. The process comprises six steps and the authors provide practical guidance and instructions for facilitators, groups, and managers when applying these six steps. The first step is to prepare standardised descriptions of the ideas under evaluation. In the second step, individuals rate (a subset of) the ideas. In the third step, a first filtering of ideas is done based on the individual ratings. In the fourth step, the facilitator of the process is asked to establish group norms. These norms will help the group to discuss the remaining ideas in the fifth step. Two group discussions are advised – one regarding the novelty of the ideas, the other about the usefulness of the ideas. In the last and sixth steps, group members complete an independent ranking of ideas based again on novelty and usefulness. By following this structured process, Baer and Zhang argue that groups can isolate more reliably those ideas that score high on both novelty and utility.

In the paper *'How do ideas gain legitimacy in internal crowdsourcing idea development? Exploring the effects of feedback on idea selection'*, Chen, Magnusson, and Björk explore the intricate process of idea selection in the milieu of internal crowdsourcing. Navigating beyond the birth of ideas into the critical realm of selection, the authors investigate the artful and discerning process of distinguishing the innovative *wheat* from the *chaff*, preventing the squandering of resources on less promising ventures. To this end, the study shines a spotlight on the concept of idea legitimacy, a critical yet elusive aspect of the recognition and selection process. Traditionally the purview of the upper echelons of management, this research reveals how legitimacy can also be cultivated democratically through a dynamic interplay of feedback from a cross-section of the organisational community. Leveraging data from a Swedish multinational's crowdsourcing initiative and employing text mining techniques, the authors uncover how authoritative feedback shapes the destiny of nascent ideas. The study reveals compelling insights: feedback emerges not simply as commentary, but as a transformative force, bestowing legitimacy on ideas vying for recognition. In essence, the study contributes a nuanced understanding of how ideas earn their merit in the competitive arena of internal crowdsourcing. It lays bare the complex roles of feedback and the actors behind it, providing managers with strategic insights into how to foster a culture where the best ideas can flourish, steering internal crowdsourcing towards its fullest innovative potential.

The paper ‘*We’re only human – An exploratory study of biases and strategic problem formulation performance*’ by Heiman and Hurmelinna-Laukkanen ventures into the innovation journey by illuminating the often-overlooked step of problem formulation, a precursor to problem solving that establishes the trajectory for generating innovative ideas. The study draws attention to the consequential nature of problem formulation, suggesting that well-articulated problems can be a source of substantial advantage, while poorly formulated problems may lead to inefficiencies and misdirected efforts. At the heart of the study is the exploration of cognitive, motivational, and informational biases that may skew problem formulation, limiting the ability to identify and capitalise on the most promising problems. Using original survey datasets gathered from the US, China, and Finland, and using the problem as the unit of analysis, the authors suggest that not all biases cast the same shadow over the problem-formulation process. While some biases can be dimmed with awareness, others stubbornly persist, with dominance proving particularly resistant to mitigation efforts. By drawing back the curtain on the subtleties of how we perceive and define problems, this research enriches our understanding of the prelude to innovation. It highlights the complex interplay of biases and awareness, offering a fresh lens on the strategic manoeuvres that shape the quest for novel and impactful solutions.

In ‘*Social networks and novelty recognition: A review and research agenda*’, Mannucci and Perry-Smith propose an original framework for helping our understanding of how social networks – comprising creators, gatekeepers, and the broader field – shape the recognition of novelty. Noting that novelty recognition occurs at various stages of an idea’s lifecycle (from its birth in the mind of a creator, through the gauntlet of gatekeeper scrutiny, to its ultimate embrace by society), the authors craft a vivid narrative around the idea lifecycle, aligning it with the foundational models of network theory – the flow, prism, and bond models – to illustrate how social connections mould the unique challenges that each stage faces. The study is a clarion call for a more integrated examination of social networks and creativity, offering fresh insights into the relational undercurrents that drive or deter the recognition of novelty, impacting the successful implementation of innovative ideas.

Finally, shifting the attention to the agency of the proponents of novel ideas, the paper ‘*Radically concrete or incrementally abstract? The contingent role of abstract and concrete framing in pitching novel ideas*’ by Falchetti, Cattani, and Ferriani examines how entrepreneurs can effectively communicate their innovative ideas in order to capture audience members’ attention and support. Drawing on a growing body of work on innovation and entrepreneurship that incorporates a linguistic lens – particularly the framing strategies that innovators can deploy to wish audience members’ support – they compare the effectiveness of two framing approaches to idea pitching: abstract vs. concrete framing. They argue that the best framing strategy to obtain audience support depends on the degree of novelty of the idea under evaluation. In two controlled experiments they investigate how the combined impact of an idea’s degree of novelty (*radical vs. incremental*) and the abstractness level (*why vs. how*) of the framing strategy used to pitch it ultimately shapes the evaluation of the members of a lay audience (e.g., crowdfunders, students, or other non-professional evaluators). The findings suggest that highly novel ideas elicit favourable evaluation from this audience when framed in concrete ‘How’ terms, whereas less novel ideas fare better when framed in abstract ‘Why’ terms. By

focusing on the framing strategies that entrepreneurs can use to communicate their new ideas, this study contributes to the growing research on the role of language in shaping the recognition of novelty. More generally, it provides entrepreneurs with actionable insights that they can leverage to attract attention and support from a general (lay) audience.

Future research

The diverse articles and essays in this special issue generate exciting insights into the mechanisms that govern how and why novelty gets recognised and selected or rejected. They not only advance the current debate but also challenge and inspire the way we think about novelty. As we raise the curtains on this special issue, we build upon these papers to outline five areas ripe for exploring further how novelty and new ideas get recognised, evaluated, and selected: 1) biases and 2) social networks in the recognition domain, 3) artificial intelligence in the evaluation domain, and 4) group processes and 5) feedback in the selection domain. Of course, this is but a glimpse into the vast potential awaiting future scholarly endeavours.

Recognition

A promising future research avenue is to explore the *biases* that shape, in particular, the recognition of novelty and new ideas. The paper by Heiman and Hurmelinna-Laukkanen points to the pivotal role of problem formulation in the innovation process and the biases that affect it. Future research could develop interventions or frameworks designed to mitigate these biases, potentially using technology or structured methodologies. There is also an opportunity to explore cultural and contextual factors that influence the emergence of biases in the identification of problems and ideas across different organisational settings. Finally, we should be reminded that navigating the landscape of research on novelty is like trying to chart the course of stars: we are often swayed by the brightest ones that endure, overlooking the countless that flicker out too soon. This is the survivor bias that skews our view and acts as a gatekeeper even before any evaluative process kicks in (Cattani et al., 2022; Seidel & Greve, 2017). Just like seeds scattered by the wind, many new ideas will not take root, and most of them will escape the world's attention. Even for the novelty that perseveres beyond this initial culling and begins to germinate, there is no guarantee of reaching full bloom (Augier et al., 2015). However, while our academic lenses are trained to study the novelties that fail after a promising growth spurt, a great deal of potential innovation goes entirely undetected because of our preoccupation with recognition and successful diffusion stories. The untold stories of those who never quite made it, or those who perhaps were never seen, beckon us to consider the value of studying these unrealised journeys. It is in these shadowed paths and ungerminated seeds that we might discover fertile ground for valuable insights into the ideation processes that falter or fail to unfold.

A second interesting research area to advance our understanding of recognising novelty and new ideas relates to the role of *social networks*. Mannucci and Perry-

Smith propose a compelling framework that links social networks to novelty recognition. To build on their insightful work, future studies could conduct empirical tests across various industries and cultural settings to validate and enhance this framework. Further exploration into how emerging digital and social media platforms influence novelty recognition could significantly modernise our understanding of social networks in today's digital landscape. Another promising research direction would involve investigating the mechanisms through which diverse audiences recognise, validate, and legitimise ideas, and examining how these evaluations are influenced by the social structures that intertwine candidates and audiences (Aadland et al., 2019; Cattani et al., 2015). Such research could greatly enrich our understanding of the dynamics of social stratification, shifting the focus from the actors seeking recognition to those who grant it and their positions within the broader social networks of the field. This shift could provide deeper insights into the social underpinnings that shape and define the pathways to innovation recognition and acceptance.

Evaluation

Exploring the possibilities offered by *artificial intelligence* (AI) can offer fresh insights that push our understanding of how novelty and new ideas get evaluated. The paper by Just et al. demonstrates the potential of AI-based language models in supporting the detection and evaluation of novelty within crowdsourced ideas. Future research could delve deeper into how AI capabilities can be improved for better accuracy and nuanced understanding of the evaluative context, as well as exploring AI's role in reducing biases in the evaluation process. Further investigation into hybrid models that combine AI with human insights could result in a balanced approach to novelty detection, leveraging the strengths of both machine efficiency and human judgement. Relatedly, there is a compelling need to explore how AI tools can be tailored to the cultural and strategic contexts of organisations, how feedback mechanisms can be structured to cultivate a culture of legitimacy and innovation, and how managers and teams can be equipped to recognise and overcome biases that impede effective problem formulation. As organisations increasingly rely on collective intelligence and technological tools for innovation, understanding these dynamics becomes crucial for guiding managerial practices and organisational policies towards more effective idea generation and implementation. For instance, the exploration of AI-based novelty detection heralds a new frontier in automating the assessment of innovative ideas, especially within crowdsourced environments (Acar, 2023; Organisciak et al., 2023). This technological advancement presents an intriguing opportunity to explore the intersection of artificial intelligence and human creativity more deeply.

Selection

To advance our understanding of how novelty and new ideas get selected, more research is needed that sheds light on the underlying *group processes*. Baer and Zhang emphasise the importance of structured group processes in evaluating and selecting

creative ideas. Future studies might explore variations in group composition and dynamics to determine their impact on the efficacy of the structured process. Additionally, longitudinal studies could examine the long-term effects of these processes on organisational innovation outcomes. Another fascinating area for future inquiry is the interface between in-group evaluative orientation and outsider ideas. This distinction is important because, crucially, it is often those on the outskirts – the ones less tethered by the conventions of the mainstream – who dare to propose the most deviant ideas (Cattani et al., 2017, 2023). Yet, the very edge that grants them their innovative spark – their status as field outsiders – paradoxically casts shadows of doubt on their credibility (Bourdieu, 1993). To lay the ground for the selection of novelty and new ideas, work in previous phases may be decisive. For instance, Falchetti et al.'s work suggests that, to bridge the chasm between scepticism and acceptance, innovators must weave the fabric of their field's language into compelling narratives, in an effort to capture the imagination and backing of their target audience. The efficacy of such rhetorical alchemy, the ability to sway the guardians at the gates of change, remains an open question, one that invites a deeper dive into the dynamics of persuasion and influence in the face of entrenched norms (Cutolo & Ferriani, 2023).

A second promising research direction that could advance our knowledge on selecting novelty and new ideas is to study the consequences that giving *feedback* may have. Chen et al. highlight the significant role of feedback in the legitimacy and selection of ideas in internal crowdsourcing contexts. This opens a promising research avenue to systematically explore different types of feedback (e.g., *peer* vs. *hierarchical*) and their specific impact on idea progression and selection. It also invites the examination of feedback mechanisms in other settings, such as open innovation platforms or digital collaborative environments. In addition, a deeper understanding of how feedback shapes the idea journey is particularly important to inform research on employee motivation. Although some studies have shown that many novel ideas are submitted at the start of an innovation program, the motivation for employees to engage in such programs often decreases over time (Deichmann & Jensen, 2018; Deichmann & Van den Ende, 2014). Rejecting certain ideas or giving negative feedback may play a decisive role in explaining the decreasing motivation. This can, in turn, jeopardise the generation and development of new ideas (Axtell et al., 2000; Frese et al., 1999). It is therefore important to better understand the factors that facilitate or hinder the generation of novel ideas over time (Deichmann & Baer, 2023; Deichmann & Jensen, 2018; Soda et al., 2021) and the role that feedback about selecting or not selecting ideas has in this regard.

While we acknowledge that the themes highlighted here represent just a few areas ripe for deeper investigation, we are excited about the potential advances in these topics and strongly encourage fellow researchers to further pursue this line of inquiry. There is much to uncover and understand, and we look forward to seeing how new perspectives and research can enrich our collective knowledge.

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