“Naturalness” of a product is a trustworthiness cue
In the Western world, which has become increasingly separated from nature, consumers display a strong preference for natural products. We call this the natural preference. Across food, medicine, and personal care products, consumers prefer products that are labeled or advertised as natural (Rozin et al. 2004). Many consumers display strong preferences for organic foods (Hughner et al. 2007), non-genetically modified foods (Scott, Inbar, and Rozin 2016; Gaskell et al. 1999), and alternative medicines (Kaptchuk and Eisenberg 1998), in part because these products are perceived as more natural and less processed by humans. In order to capitalize on this preference, some companies sell exclusively natural products (e.g., The Honest Company) or have added natural product alternatives (e.g., Clorox GreenWorks).

Despite the consumer demand and growing industry trends around natural products, scant research has been devoted to understanding the psychology of the natural preference. The research that has been conducted on this preference has focused largely on which individuals prefer natural products (e.g., Smith, Huang, and Lin 2009) and why individuals might always prefer these types of products (e.g., due to ethical motivations; Honkanen, Verplanken, and Olsen 2006; Scott, Inbar, and Rozin 2016). Yet the natural preference deserves more theory-building and empirical attention, especially concerning the psychological underpinnings of why preferences for natural differ across contexts.

In the present research, we propose that “naturalness” offers a trustworthiness cue—consumers infer that natural products are reliable, safe, and honest. Therefore, naturalness is most appealing in the absence of other trustworthiness indicators. When other cues are available to indicate that a product is reliable and trustworthy, the naturalness cue is somewhat superfluous and adds less extra information. However, in the face of an uncertain purchase decision with few other trust cues, naturalness is a heavily weighted indicator.

For example, familiar brands can serve as a trust cues; brand trust involves consumers relying on the brand to perform its stated function and believing that brand is reliable, safe and honest (Chaudhuri and Holbrook 2001; Moorman, Zaltman, and Deshpande, 1992; Morgan and Hunt, 1994). According to our theoretical account, natural products should be less appealing when the consideration set is one of familiar as opposed to unfamiliar brands. In a consideration set with familiar brands, the trustworthiness indicated by the naturalness of a product is less informative, because all products have a relatively high baseline level of trustworthiness. Furthermore, these effects should be most apparent for consumers who have low trait affinity for natural products. For consumers who always purchase and desire naturalness, we do not expect the appeal of naturalness to be moderated by context. For consumers that have low to moderate desire for naturalness, context (e.g., brand familiarity) should more strongly influence appeal of natural alternatives.

In three preliminary studies, we have found effects consistent with these hypotheses. Participants were presented with pairs of natural and synthetic products. Pairs were either actual products offered by familiar brands (e.g., “Smucker’s Raspberry Jam” versus “Smucker’s Natural Raspberry Jam”) or equivalent products with a novel brand name (e.g., “Ambrosia’s Raspberry Jam” versus “Ambrosia’s Natural Raspberry Jam”). Product pairs included cleaning products (Study 1, \(N=406\)), foods (Study 2, \(N=403\)) or both (Study 3, \(N=802\)). Participants indicated whether they preferred the natural or synthetic product. In a regression including all three studies (with studies as dummy variables and interactions between studies with other

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1 To the lay consumer, “natural” products are those that are not processed by humans (Rozin, 2005).
experimental variables), there is a significant reduction in relative preference for natural product when the brands were familiar ($b^* = -.16, p < .001$). Additionally, this effect was moderated by trait affinity for natural products, where the effect of brand familiarity is diminishes for those with high trait affinity for natural products ($b^* = .20, p < .001$). In other words, naturalness is most appealing for unfamiliar brands, and this is especially true for individuals with low trait affinity for natural products.

While our laboratory findings are important and robust, there are a number of crucial future steps in our investigation. We plan to demonstrate in future studies that these results are not particular to brand familiarity and generalize to other contexts that vary in trustworthiness of products.

First, we will examine expert endorsement as a trustworthiness cue. We expect when experts recommend a product, these products will be seen as more trustworthy (e.g., reliable, safe, and honest). Therefore, for products that have been endorsed by experts, we anticipate the cue of naturalness will be less informative and natural products will be less strongly preferred. We intend to test this hypothesis in a 2 (Product Endorsed: Yes, No) by 2 (Natural: Yes, No) between subjects design. Participants will rate the desirability products that have either been endorsed by experts or not and are either natural or not. We anticipate the preference for natural as compared to the unnatural alternative will be strongest when both products have not been endorsed by experts, and that this effect will be especially large for individuals low on trait affinity for natural products. These results would rule out alternative explanations for our preliminary results about brand familiarity and generalize our effect to a larger set of contexts.

Second, we will directly manipulate trust by priming trusting behavior of participants. Participants’ judgments and decisions can change when they realize a brand or advertisement is trying to persuade them to purchase a product (Friestad and Wright 1994). We expect that cueing participants to be skeptical of products will create a situation where naturalness is more appealing, because in these otherwise uncertain situations the naturalness trust cue is particularly important (Moorman, Zaltman, and Deshpande 1992; Doney and Cannon 1997). We will examine these hypotheses in a 2 (Prime: Trust, Suspicion) X 2 (Natural: Yes, No). Participants will either read a paragraph about how the product they are about to examine is from a product category that is unregulated and highly variable in quality (suspicion prime) or heavily regulated and extremely reliable quality (trust prime). Then, participants will rate desirability of a natural or unnatural product. We anticipate that participants will desire a natural product more when suspicion has been primed, and that this will be especially true for individuals low on trait affinity for natural products. These results will allow us to test our theorized mechanism by manipulating trust directly.

I hope the Ackoff Fellowship will allow me to build on this research. The financial support of $3420 that I am seeking would serve two purposes. First, it would allow me to present these results at two conferences—the Society of Judgment and Decision Making Conference and the Society for Consumer Psychology Conference. Second, this support would be used to fund further research. While the Psychology Department offers some funding to cover conference travel, these funds are limited. With the Ackoff Fellowship, I hope to further explore and disseminate our findings. My collaborators and I eventually plan to submit this work to a top-tier marketing journal, such as the Journal of Marketing Research or the Journal of Consumer Research.
References


