



Mother natural: Motivations and associations for consuming *natural* foods



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ABSTRACT

Natural is perceived as innately positive and is a widely sought-after attribute in food products. The natural food industry continues to grow in response to rising consumer demand. This qualitative study explored mothers' motivations for purchasing and consuming *natural* food products for themselves and their families. Mothers are an important population because of their disproportionate influence on household food consumption. We employed participant photography and a series of three weekly focus groups to derive a rich understanding of the activities surrounding and motivations behind seeking natural in everyday buying decisions. Five major themes were identified. First, natural nurtures well-being: physical, psychological, social, and emotional health. Second, natural behaves "supernaturally," allowing positive attributes to be transmitted from the source to the recipient. Third, natural is associated with authenticity, providing a sense of trust, transparency, and control. Fourth, consuming natural reinforces the socially constructed idea of a good mother. Lastly, the preference for natural does not always translate into purchase; mothers face compromises because of conflicting priorities and resources. Understanding mothers' multiple motivations provides deeper insight into the attraction for natural products. The findings have application in positioning interventions for more nutritional eating and revising regulations on the food label natural.

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1. Background

From packaged foods to fast-food, natural claims continue to lure customers looking for less processed products (Gee & Haddon, 2016; Woodyard, 2016). Despite awareness that the label *natural* may be little more than a marketing gimmick (Hartman Group, 2014), the preference for natural foods persists (Rozin, 2005; Williams, 2016). Previous research has suggested that the desirability of the natural stems from both instrumental and ideational reasons (Amos, Pentina, Hawkins, & Davis, 2014; Li & Chapman, 2012; Rozin, Fischler, & Shields-Argelès, 2012). Instrumental reasons for preferring natural occur when individuals attribute functional superiority to natural entities. For example, individuals believe natural food tastes better; is more nutritious, safer, fresher, and healthier; and has less environmental impact than chemically equivalent artificial counterparts (Amos et al., 2014; Berry, Burton,

& Howlett, 2017; Binner, 2015; Dickson-Spillmann, Siegrist, & Keller, 2011a; Li & Chapman, 2012; Liu, Hooker, Parasidis, & Simons, 2017; McFadden & Huffman, 2017; Prada, Garrido, & Rodrigues, 2017; Rozin et al., 2012; Skubisz, 2017). Ideational reasons concern a perceived moral or aesthetic superiority innate to natural foods (Amos et al., 2014; Li & Chapman, 2012; Rozin et al., 2004). Natural is seen as pure and spiritual (Rozin et al., 2012); it evokes sentimental, pastoral imagery from a time before human contamination (Amos et al., 2014; Thompson, 2011); and it simply "feels right" (Li & Chapman, 2012, p. 2860). Both sources (instrumental and ideational) contribute to individuals' preference for natural (Rozin et al., 2012), resulting in a "natural is better" heuristic that individuals use to simplify food decisions (Li & Chapman, 2012). Inferences about the supposed superiority of natural foods increase consumer preference and willingness-to-pay (Liu et al., 2017). On average, American consumers value the label *natural* more highly than conventional foods but less than organics, making them "imperfect substitutes for organic foods" (McFadden & Huffman, 2017, p. 220).

Ambiguity as to what can legally be labeled *natural* adds to the confusion. Worldwide, the label "natural" is not well regulated

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(Rozin et al., 2012). For example, in the United States, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) does not object to the use of the term *natural* “if the food does not contain added color, artificial flavors, or synthetic substances” (US-HHS-FDA, 2016a). This definition permits foods to be labeled *natural* that diverge from consumer expectations. For example, almost two-thirds of individuals mistakenly believe the label excludes genetically modified foods (GMs), pesticides, and highly processed ingredients (Consumer Reports, 2015). Yet the FDA currently maintains a “case by case basis” for determining natural claims, such as their decision to allow high fructose corn syrup (HFCS) to be labeled as natural if processing does not let synthetic fixing agents be in contact with the corn substrate (June, 2008). Recently, the FDA sought public comment on use of the term on food labels for the consideration of potential regulation change (US-HHS-FDA, 2015). As of the present time (2017), however, the FDA has yet to clarify appropriate use of the term on food packaging.

Notwithstanding varying opinions among individuals, food scientists, manufacturers, and regulators as to what merits the label *natural*, consumers' preference for natural food continues (Ares, De Saldamando, Giménez, & Deliza, 2014). More comprehensive explorations of this preference for natural-labeled foods are warranted. Extant research on natural reduces food to its constituent ingredients, nutrients, and processes while largely ignoring the symbolic, aesthetic, physical, cultural, and moral significance of both food and natural in the consumers' daily experiences (Thompson, 2011). To better understand the complex associations that consumers have with the word *natural* and how these inform their consumption behaviors requires stepping outside of the research laboratory and into the family home. Our investigation adopts a “richer definition of food” embedded in the holistic, integrative perspective of *food well-being*, which considers the “positive psychological, physical, emotional, and social relationship” consumers have with food (Block et al., 2011, p. 6). It seeks to broaden the conversation about food away from a narrow focus on health and restraint to capture the positive, integrated role food plays in a person's daily well-being (Block et al., 2011). Examining how mothers conceptualize natural in their everyday food practices furthers our understanding of what motivates the attraction to the natural and the consequential influence of the food label (Ares et al., 2014; Thompson, 2011; Warde, 2016).

Mothers were chosen as the focus of this study because of their special influence as nutritional gatekeepers for household food purchases and consumption (Johnson, Sharkey, Dean, McIntosh, & Kubena, 2011; Wansink, 2007). In addition, surveys have found that parenthood correlates with an increased interest in natural claims while shopping (Euromonitor, 2016; Mintel, 2014). Research also indicates that households with young children (aged 0–3) are willing to pay a premium for *natural* over conventional foods (McFadden & Huffman, 2017). Furthermore, mothers play an important role in food socialization via direct and indirect influences: shaping their children's food preferences, their consumption habits, and how the children associate food with emotions and certain behaviors (Benton, 2004; Eli, Hörnell, Malek, & Nowicka, 2017; Larsen et al., 2015; Sleddens, Gerards, Thijs, Vries, & Kremers, 2011).

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Twenty women, all mothers and residing in southwest Virginia, participated in this study. Participants constituted a convenience sample recruited through postings on online and real-world community boards. After indicating their willingness to participate, a

short questionnaire was deployed to ensure the potential participant understood the time commitment and met the criteria. Acceptance to the study depended on maternal age (over 18 years) having children under 18 years old in the household. We purposefully sought mothers with younger children as family environment and parenting practices have significant influence in early childhood (Savage, Fisher, & Birch, 2007; Schwartz, Scholtens, Lalanne, Weenen, & Nicklaus, 2011). We also sought participants who were trying to conceive or who were currently pregnant to explore the possible effects of the liminal experience of pre-pregnancy and pregnancy on natural perceptions. Table 1 presents the characteristics of the 20 mothers. The women ranged in age from 24 to 46 (mean 33 years) and all identified as non-Hispanic white. Participants had children between the ages of four months to 16 years, and the majority (18 participants) had one child under 2. All participants were married or living with their partner and had above average education levels (some college or more). The mean household (HH) income was \$66,000, but there was a large variance with seven earning less than \$38,000 per year.

2.2. Participant photography

Our study used the visual approach of participant photography (Ozanne, Moscato, & Kunkel, 2013). Participant photography incorporates participant-contributed photographs and interpretations to capture and explore the participant's contextualized experiences (Ozanne et al., 2013). This method requests that participants capture their lived experiences through photographing daily activities and symbolic representations of thoughts and feelings. Participants then meet in a focus group forum with other participants and the researcher to discuss the meaning of those photographs. The photographs and subsequent discussions permit an intimate view into daily activities—such as meals, snacks, shopping, and eating out—without the physical intrusion of the researcher into the private sphere (Johnson et al., 2011; Ozanne et al., 2013; Power, 2003). The photographs also provide participants with concrete, tangible images to assist in articulating their thoughts and feelings during the discussion (Wang & Burris, 1997).

2.3. Data collection process

The study was conducted over a three-week period during which participants took photographs and attended a focus group each week to discuss the pictures they had taken in the prior days (see Fig. 1). After agreeing to take part in the study, participants met with the researchers in person to review and sign consent forms, pick up and run through operating their digital camera, and receive the question to guide their picture taking for the coming week. Guiding questions were used each week to focus the picture taking. The questions started broadly and continued to narrow over the three weeks. Week 1 asked participants to photograph “what is natural?” and “what is unnatural?” with no explicit mention of food or beverages. The objective was to gain a broad insight into the items and experiences the mothers construed as natural or not. In Week 2, participants were requested to photograph daily food and drink experiences they considered natural or unnatural. The objective this week was to better understand spontaneous perceptions of natural and artificial foods, irrespective of product claims about naturalness. In Week 3, the focus narrowed again to the actual label *natural*. Participants were requested to photograph the presence and absence of the label on foods and beverages, together with other package claims or images they believed communicated natural or not. After taking photos for the week, participants met with a research assistant who downloaded the

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