

# Naturalness as a success factor

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The closer to nature, the better. Consumers in developed countries often prefer food that corresponds to their notion of naturalness. Credit: Colourbox

"Naturalness" is a construct – but according to a new study from the ETH Consumer Behavior group, a product's success on the food market is primarily defined by whether or not consumers perceive it as natural.

The increasingly artificial and virtual nature of everyday life has now achieved broad acceptance, and the benefits that technological development bring to everyone cannot be denied. But when it comes to groceries, the trend is in fact the opposite: [consumers](#) are more and more sensitive on the subject of [food](#). In Switzerland, the fear that food could contain foreign substances or be misleadingly or falsely labelled is currently causing an uptick in complaints to the Foundation for

Consumer Protection and putting a strain on the laboratories responsible for federal monitoring of foodstuffs.

The authenticity of the food on our plates plays a key role in acceptance and perceptions of quality. This is also the conclusion drawn by a broad-based review study by ETH Professor for Consumer Behavior Michael Siegrist. Together with Spanish colleagues, he recently published the study in the journal *Trends in Food Science & Technology*.

## **A vague yet relevant term**

"The importance of naturalness for foodstuffs is of great practical relevance, yet it has never been the subject of in-depth research," says Siegrist. One key topic is to what extent products themselves are perceived as natural. Another is the question of what in fact is associated with the term "natural". The latter issue, however, is difficult to determine, and was not the subject of this study; publications on this topic have been few and unconvincing.

From the initial 1,000 scientific articles, the researchers eventually selected 72 that related to the research questions and could be compared with one another. The meaning of naturalness was measured according to three main categories: how was the product grown? (E.g. organically or in the local region). How was it processed? (E.g. presence or absence of additives, colourings, flavourings and hormones. And another aspect: the degree to which a product has been processed – the lower the better, in the consumer's opinion). And lastly: how natural does the final product appear to end consumers? Keywords here: health and taste, freshness and ecological focus. "Naturalness" may seem like a cohesive term, but the study reveals that it is in fact highly abstract and evokes extremely varied associations.

## **Strongly weighted naturalness**

What is the most surprising finding from the study? "It's notable that all the studies conclude that popularity among a majority of consumers is closely linked to how natural a product is perceived as being. This was true for 85,000 participants from 32 different countries across a period of around 20 years," says Siegrist. However, it's worth noting that all of the studies were carried out in relatively wealthy industrialised countries in Europe, Asia, America and Oceania. In developing and emerging market countries, heavily processed products may be perceived more positively as they are expensive and thus associated with social prestige. The same inquiry might well produce the opposite result there: a lower status given to "natural" foodstuffs and a higher one to industrially produced products, suggests the ETH professor.

## **A challenge to industry**

When analysed in detail, the comparison shows that older people and women are more concerned with naturalness than young people and men, and that consumers who prefer [organic products](#) place particular importance on the naturalness of foodstuffs. This also seems to be the case for individuals who focus on traditional, sustainable, healthy and organic products when shopping. It should therefore come as no surprise that the study links an inclination towards naturalness with negative attitudes towards technological innovations in the food industry.

This point led the researchers to their key conclusion: companies working with innovative food technologies – keywords: in vitro meat and 3-D-printed foodstuffs – need to keep the naturalness factor in mind. "Even though human perception is clearly subject to certain distortions, the key role that authenticity plays in the acceptance of foodstuffs is a fact. This means that products which are perceived as artificial will not

be accepted by consumers in future either," argues Siegrist. In order to be successful, food producers must therefore satisfy the sometimes contradictory demands of consumers. For example, they need to persuasively link food safety and closeness to nature – and do this at an early stage of the product development process.

**More information:** Sergio Román et al. The importance of food naturalness for consumers: Results of a systematic review, *Trends in Food Science & Technology* (2017). [DOI: 10.1016/j.tifs.2017.06.010](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tifs.2017.06.010)

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