



Effective strategies for overcoming the naturalistic heuristic

Experimental evidence on consumer acceptance of “clean” meat

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Abstract

The naturalistic heuristic of “what is natural is good” poses a serious barrier to consumer adoption of genetically modified foods, childhood vaccinations, and related technologies. In this study, we examine three messaging strategies — direct debunking, embracing unnaturalness, and descriptive norms — for overcoming consumer resistance in the context of a new food technology: “clean meat” (also known as “cultured” or “in vitro” meat). We compare the effects of these three pro-clean meat appeals against the undermining effects of being exposed to anti-clean meat reactions from other potential consumers. We find persistent negative effects of the anti-clean meat social information over 10 weeks. Of the three pro-clean meat appeals, only the embrace unnaturalness appeal successfully offset the undermining effects of anti-clean meat social information over the 10 week study period, suggesting that advocates wishing to enhance consumer acceptance of new food technologies should focus on how these technologies are similar to products that also seem “unnatural” but which are already widely adopted by consumers.

¹ Corresponding author. De-identified data and code for this project will be made available at: github.com/bnjmacdonald/antinaturalistic-fallacy. All experimental materials, including the text of the treatments and the survey questions, will also be made available there. This research was approved by the Stanford Institutional Review Board (protocol ID: 39306) and the Australian National University (protocol ID: 2016/613). Funding: This research was supported by Animal Charity Evaluators. Animal Charity Evaluators had no involvement in any aspect of study design, implementation, or write up of the results. Declaration of interests: none.