Why Consumers Don’T See the Benefits of Gmos, and What Marketers Can Do About It

Sean T. Hingston, York University, Canada
Theodore J. Noseworthy, York University, Canada

Drawing on research that distinguishes how people reason about natural and manmade objects, the authors find that consumers are more accepting of GMOs when cues suggest they are manmade. Specifically, if consumers view a GMO as manmade, moral opposition diminishes and perceived benefits increase, which subsequently increases purchase intentions.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

In this work, we set out to demonstrate when consumers will respond positively to genetic modification and, consequently, when they will perceive the benefits that a GMO offers. A growing body of research has demonstrated that people prefer natural things to less natural alternatives (Rozin 2005, 2006; Rozin et al. 2004). In fact, merely labeling a food product as natural can elicit a positive response from consumers (Rozin et al. 2004). Furthermore, research suggests the preference for natural things appears to be ultimately rooted in people’s moral values regarding the natural environment (Rozin et al. 2004; Sjoberg 2000). Like the moral motivation underlying the preference for natural, evidence suggests that there is a strong moral motivation underlying the opposition to genetic modification (Bredahl 2001; Frewer et al. 2013; Scott et al. 2016). For example, the moral response to genetic modification tends to stem from the notion that those who create GMOs are tampering with, or violating, nature (Sjoberg 2000). Where this poses a challenge for firms is that the moral obligation to nature is unconditional and thus people believe it should be upheld regardless of potential benefits (Baron and Spranca 1997; Scott et al. 2016). This finding is particularly important because it suggests that consumers may even be responsive to explicit benefits in GMOs, and thus overriding the moral response to genetic modification may facilitate consumers’ ability to perceive a GMO’s benefits. The question is, when would this occur? It is our contention that the answer to this question begins with what it means for something to be natural, and in particular, how people differentially reason about manmade and naturally occurring objects.

Drawing on research that distinguishes how people reason about manmade objects (e.g., cars, smartphones) and naturally occurring objects (e.g., apples, trees), we are the first to isolate the moral barrier to perceiving the benefits of GMOs, and in doing so, identify simple cues that marketers can adopt to overcome this barrier. Specifically, we propose that the distinction between natural and manmade objects becomes particularly relevant to GMOs in how evaluations are differentially impacted by human intervention. Human intervention through genetic modification violates a natural entity’s essence, rendering it unnatural. Given that people prefer natural and possess moral values about the preservation of nature (Rozin et al. 2004; Sjoberg 2000), they tend to weigh these values over any functional benefits that result from human intervention (Scholderer and Frewer 2003; Scott et al. 2016). However, for manmade objects, human intervention is both normative and purposeful. Given the emphasis on a manmade object’s intended function, human intervention tends to promote inferences about the purpose and functional implications of the intervention (Bloom 1996; 1998; Dennett 1987). If the object is perceived to be able to achieve its intended function, then arguably, this object is “good.” Hence, it stands to reason that if viewed as a manmade object, a GMO may be evaluated in terms of its functional benefits more so than its moral status.

The core objective of Study 1 was to demonstrate that consumers will respond more positively towards a GMO when they are cued to view it as manmade as opposed to natural. Participants (N = 175) were randomly assigned to one of four conditions in a 2 (Label: GMO vs. Naturally Grown) × 2 (Promotional Cue: Natural Cue vs. Manmade Cue) between-subjects factorial design. Participants viewed an ad that either stated that the product was naturally grown or genetically modified. Also, the ad in the natural (manmade) cue condition depicted the product as fruit hanging from a tree (packaged). As predicted, purchase intentions were higher for the GMO that was presented as a manmade product (i.e., packaged) compared to the GMO that was presented as a natural product (i.e., fruit hanging from a tree).

Study 2 was designed to test whether cueing consumers to view the GMO as manmade also reduced moral opposition. Participants (N = 160) were recruited at a farmer’s market and randomly assigned to one of four conditions in a 2 (Label: GMO vs. Naturally Grown) × 2 (Product Cue: Natural Cue vs. Manmade Cue) between-subjects factorial design. Participants viewed an apple that was either noted as being naturally grown or genetically modified. Also, the apple in the natural (manmade) cue condition was red (blue). Consistent with Study 1, purchase intentions were higher for the GMO that looked like a manmade product (i.e., blue) compared to the GMO that looked like a natural product (i.e., red). Furthermore, consumers reported less moral opposition towards the GMO that looked like a manmade product compared to the GMO that looked like a natural product.

Study 3 was designed to test whether cueing consumers to view the GMO as manmade overrides the moral response and subsequently allows consumers to perceive the benefits it offers. Participants (N = 200) were randomly assigned to one of four conditions in a 2 (Label: GMO vs. Naturally Grown) × 2 (Promotional Cue: Natural Cue vs. Manmade Cue) between-subjects factorial design. Participants were randomly assigned to evaluate either four manmade or natural products. Then, participants evaluated another product (Corn Flakes) that was either noted as containing corn that was naturally grown or genetically modified. As predicted, purchase intentions were higher for the GMO cereal that was positioned amongst manmade products compared to the GMO that was positioned amongst natural products. Furthermore, consumers reported greater perceived utilitarian benefits and less moral opposition towards the GMO that looked like a manmade product compared to the GMO that looked like a natural product. Finally, a conditional serial mediation analysis revealed that moral judgments and perceived utilitarian benefits serially mediated the effect of Promotional Cue on purchase intentions for the GMO but not the natural product.

REFERENCES


