



For many shoppers, organic doesn't always mean better, a new study finds. In fact, many people react negatively to such foods, and both positive and negative impressions of organic foods are based partly on the personal values of a consumer, researchers at Cornell University and the University of Michigan discovered.

The two-part study found that some conditions produce a bad impression of organic labels among shoppers, due to the consumers' values.

"Our data suggest when organic practices do not appeal to a consumer's values, they expect organic food to taste worse," said Jonathon Schuldt, Cornell assistant professor of communication.

In the first part of the study, researchers asked 215 students whether they thought organic food was healthier and tastier than conventional food. While most agreed that organics were a healthier choice, fewer expected the food to taste good by comparison to non-organic options. The research shows this was especially true for students who had low concern for the environment.

"The personal values of the rater mattered," Schuldt said.

In the second part of the study, researchers had 156 participants read one of two versions of a fake news article discussing a drink. The story described the development of a drink product designed to relieve the symptoms of African children suffering from severe malnutrition. In one version, the drink was described as organic every time it was mentioned, while the other version never mentioned the word organic.

The results showed that those people who were highly pro-environment judged the organic version of the drink to be less effective compared with the non-organic version [MD1] .

Schuldt said the results serve as a reminder that the halo effect, a phenomenon in which a label leads consumers to have a positive opinion of the product, hinges on the values of each shopper.

"It's not the case that you can label a food organic and expect that everyone will perceive it more positively," he said. "Under certain circumstances, ethical labels could have an unintended backfire effect."

Schuldt said future research should involve taste tests of organic and conventional foods to see if personal values influence a consumer's perceptions when actually eating the food.

The study, which was co-authored by Michigan student Mary Hannahan, was recently published online in the journal *Appetite*.

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