

B-Sci Bite:

How do consumers think about natural (vs. synthetic) remedies for treating illness?



A preference for natural remedies in healthcare contexts?

Imagine catching a case of the blues: you're feeling sad, mopey, and downtrodden. But after some time, you decide to seek treatment. Your doctor presents you with two options for you to consider: an antidepressant that was made in a pharmaceutical lab and, separately, an over-the-counter natural remedy. Which do you go for? Now, imagine an alternative: instead of managing a psychological condition, you are dealing with a physical one (e.g., itchy skin). Do your thoughts about the ideal treatment differ across scenarios (i.e., psychological vs. physical conditions)?

If you are drawn to natural remedies for both hypotheticals, you're in good company. Behavioral science research has found that people prefer natural remedies over pharmaceuticals—and this tendency is not limited to one specific [culture](#) or time. In fact, this “pro-natural” preference is so strong that it even applies to other types of consumption settings, from [food](#) to [personal care products](#), and [more](#).

Does condition type change the strength of this preference at all?

So, now we know that people have a pro-natural tendency, including when thinking about ideal medical treatment options. But, does the strength of this preference change across psychological, versus physical, ailments? David Gal and Tianyi Li, behavioral scientists and marketing experts from the [University of Illinois Chicago](#) and [Hong Kong University](#), say it does.

The researchers conducted a series of studies where they presented thousands of consumers with scenarios involving the choice between natural and synthetic treatment options. When making these choices, consumers consistently exhibited a stronger preference for natural remedies when the condition was psychological (e.g. mood disorders, anxiety) rather than physical (e.g. skin rashes, nerve pain). This effect persisted even when controlling for alternative explanations like perceived treatment side effects or viewing mental health issues as less severe.

What drives this amplified natural preference for treating psychological conditions?

Follow-up work revealed the “why” behind this pattern of results. Consumers’ strong pro-natural preference for treating psychological conditions stems from a desire to preserve the “true self”—who a person is deep, deep down inside. Maintaining a connection to this true self is critical for psychological wellbeing. People tend to associate psychological characteristics like personality, emotions, and cognition more closely with their true selves than physical attributes. As a result, consumers are especially concerned about altering or compromising the “true self” when it comes to treating psychological conditions. Specifically, they fear that manmade pharmaceuticals could potentially change core parts of their identities and “true selves”; they view natural remedies as less likely to produce such changes.

How does this bias affect marketing?

These findings have important implications for how people engage with their health. For instance, one possible consequence of consumers’ pro-natural preference is for them to disregard medical advice, prematurely discontinue prescriptions, and even avoid seeking help from psychiatrists altogether. To help avoid such negative outcomes, healthcare providers and pharmaceutical companies alike can prioritize educating consumers about the safety and benefits of synthetic medications. Pharmaceutical marketers can complement such efforts by creating authenticity-driven value propositions, especially for offerings pertaining to psychological wellbeing. Such individuals can emphasize that pharmaceuticals may not only alleviate symptoms but also allow the “true self” to be unveiled.

Questions? Or simply curious? Get in touch!

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