

WHOLESOME FOODS AND WHOLESOME MORALS: CAN ORGANIC AND COMFORT FOOD CHOICES INFLUENCE MORAL JUDGMENT?



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INTRODUCTION

Contemporary food advertisements sometimes associate moral terms with organic food (e.g., Honest Tea, Purity Life, E-Conscious, Greater Living, etc.). However, it is unclear whether there is actually a relationship between morality and food or if it is simply a marketing technique. The purpose of this study was to determine whether thoughts about organic (vs. comfort) foods can influence moral judgments.

It was hypothesized that exposure to organic food would induce harsher moral judgments and vice versa for those exposed to comfort food. Anecdotally, it seems possible that people might feel more righteous after being primed with organic food and more likely to judge others harshly. Further, exposure to comfort food might make participants “feel better” and therefore make kinder moral judgments. Finally, the relationships between various taste preferences and moral judgments were assessed.

METHOD

Fifty BASE students (25 female, 25 male) participated in this study (Age: $M = 16.42$, $SD = .70$).

Food Manipulation (Organic food vs. Comfort food prime)

Participants were directed to copy a short passage describing one’s preference for organic food OR comfort food.

Moral Judgments (Wheatley & Haidt, 2005)

Participants rated six different moral transgressions on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from *not at all morally wrong* (1) to *extremely morally wrong* (7).

Vignettes describe various transgressions, including a man eating his already-dead dog, second cousin consensual incest, a bribe accepting congressman, etc.

Taste Preferences

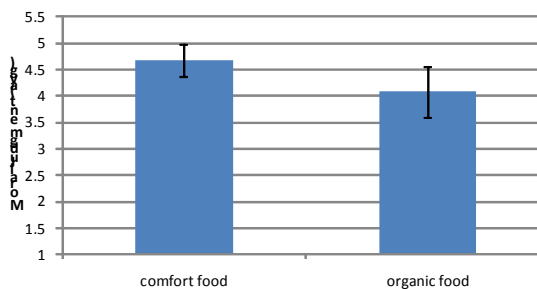
Participants finally reported their taste preferences (e.g., *How much do you enjoy sweet foods*) on a 7-point scale ranging from *not at all* (1) to *very much* (7).

RESULTS

An independent samples t test was conducted to determine whether organic or comfort food primes influences moral judgments. Each participant’s six judgments were averaged into a single judgment for this analysis.

Results showed that the comfort food prime induced significantly harsher moral judgments than the organic food prime, $t(48) = 2.714$, $p < .01$.

Effects of Food Primes on Moral Judgment



RESULTS

Correlational analyses showed that only the sweet and spicy taste preferences were associated with moral judgment.

Sweet preference was positively correlated with harsher moral judgment ($r = .33$, $p < .05$).

Spicy preference was negatively correlated with harsher moral judgment ($r = -.295$, $p < .05$).

DISCUSSION

It was hypothesized that exposure to organic food would induce harsher moral judgments and vice versa for those exposed to comfort food. The results showed the **opposite** pattern. People primed with comfort food were more significantly more likely to make harsher moral judgments than those primed with organic food.

One possible reason for this is that those primed with comfort food might *also* have been induced with moral guilt. The paragraph that participants copied described someone who was “*not worried about how it [food choice] affects the environment or animals*” and how “*I don’t really care if...the cows that were made into hamburger beef were treated poorly.*” This prime might have induced moral guilt, which participants reduced by making **harsher moral judgments** about others.

The correlations were also surprising. Why would people who like sweet foods make harsher moral judgments than those who do not like sweet foods? And why would people who like spicy food make kinder moral judgments than people who do not like spicy food? These results seem to be the opposite of what one would expect, and future research should explore them in greater detail.

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