

## Negotiating Virtue and Vice

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**Abstract**

Prior studies have suggested that despite increasing sustainability awareness, many consumers are confused about the impact of green products on their health and the environment. Unlike such studies which privilege professional discourse and adopt unrealistic presumptions of rationality and morality, this article showcases consumers as active co-producers of value and meanings. Using netnography, the article analyzes social media conversations around Naked Juice and Innocent smoothies—two products marketed as healthy, all-natural, and environmentally sustainable beverages. The findings reveal a baseline picture of the products' virtues of healthiness feeling (hedonic) and holistic health image (symbolic). This article illustrates how this moral conception was dynamically constructed and transformed in the course of consumers' communicative practices. It proposes three discursive strategies by which consumers negotiate the nature and boundaries of good and bad choices vis-à-vis the products: *highlighting* (separating virtue from vice), *balancing* (reconciling virtue and vice), and *resisting* (reconstructing virtue as vice).

**Keywords:** Social Media; Natural Products, Halo Effect, Moral Judgments, Consumer Narratives, Netnography

Whether it is more efficient light bulbs to conserve energy or fair-trade coffee to support sustainable development, market reports over the last few decades have consistently depicted a growing market for green products (e.g., Gfk Roper Green Gauge Report since 1992). This rosy narrative, however, belies a murkier picture of consumers' desires for and understandings about green products. In a recent U.S. consumer survey conducted by Cone Communications (2013), 71% of the respondents said they do consider the environment when making purchases, yet only 30% reported using green products in a way that achieves the intended environmental benefit. The survey also noted a discrepancy between consumers' purported knowledge and that demonstrated during the survey. Although most respondents claimed they understood the environmental terms used by firms, 62% "erroneously" believe common expressions such as "green" or "environmentally friendly" mean a product has a positive or neutral ecological impact rather than the supposedly correct meaning of a lighter impact than other similar products or less than it used to (Cone Communications, 2013).

The discrepancy between lay understandings of sustainability concepts and those defined in expert, policy, or corporate discourses is often regarded as confusion or ignorance on the part of the consumer. It is commonly attributed to the contentious nature of the terms used (Baum, 2012), advertisers' vague or misleading environmental claims (Plec & Pettenger, 2012), and consumers' inadequate knowledge (Cone Communications, 2013). Regardless of the underlying reasons, the discrepancy is thought to define a communication task for green marketers, policy makers, and advocacy groups—educating consumers so that they are better equipped to make more accurate judgments and informed choices (Bortree, Ahern, Dou, & Smith, 2012; Mudry, 2010; Schaefer & Crane, 2005). This proposition, in practice, means bringing

consumers' understanding of sustainability closer to the preferred meanings of those sponsoring the discourses. By glossing over the divergence of lay understanding from professional knowledge or framing it as consumer confusion or ignorance, commentators privilege the professional discourses and neglect to understand what consumers are saying, in their own words, about green products.

### **Consumers' Social Media Conversations around Green Products**

This study analyzed consumer-to-consumer communications in social media—social networking sites, blogs, discussion forums, and product review sites—around two products heavily reliant on appropriating notions of nature and sustainability in their marketing communications. Such social media conversations offer a distinct research opportunity to explore how consumers (a) negotiate the nature and boundaries of good and bad choices; and (b) articulate their understandings of the value and meaning of the products through interactions with other consumers. Consumers' social media conversations are regarded in this study as a network of narratives through which consumption meanings of the products are represented, become comprehended, and are put into social practice (Thompson & Troester, 2002). It is assumed that “in narrative, people continually make sense of their world ‘on the fly’... Experience is literally talked into meaningfulness” (Shore, 1996, p. 58). Furthermore, people also reiterate and transform culturally shared meanings, ideas, norms, and values through narration (Moisander & Pesonen, 2002).

In previous research on this topic, consideration of how consumers make sense of sustainability claims has been somewhat researcher-centric. Consumers have been asked to respond to researcher-selected stimuli (e.g., product packaging; Spack, Board,

Crighton, Kostka, & Ivory, 2012) irrespective of whether they were interested in the product category or not. This study was designed to give greater emphasis to consumers, their choices, and their thoughts and feelings about a green product and how it fits or does not fit into their lives. The intention was to recognize that “a great deal of the ‘consuming’ people do is not undertaken by them as ‘consumers’ at all, but is embedded in other sorts of social practices—being a good parent, a caring partner or a good friend” (Barnett, Clarke, Cloke, & Malpass, 2005, p. 46). It moves us beyond the excessive focus in green consumption studies on individual, rational motivations, and objective product utility (Schaefer & Crane, 2005) toward a more holistic understanding of the meaning of the product for consumers flowing from their habits, routines, norms, beliefs, and values. This understanding can help to reconcile the mismatch between lay conceptions and professional/expert discourses. For instance, Enticott (2003) examined why rural consumers continue to buy unpasteurized milk even though it is labeled as “risky” by official scientific discourses. He found that rural consumers wanted to protect a rural identity imbued with a culture of nature, and that shapes their lay knowledge and moral judgments concerning food safety. It is therefore pertinent for studies to establish rather than axiomatically assert the nature of consumers’ moral judgments and conceptions of sustainable practices (Caruana, 2007).

Much of our understanding of the green marketplace comes from market reports, media coverage, marketing communications, and other such professional discourse. That discourse is held up as the legitimate channel through which consumers are expected to learn about products, and they are subsequently expected to apply that knowledge when making choices in the marketplace (e.g., USDA food guidelines; Mudry, 2010). Subscribing to this idea, a major approach in environmental

communication studies has been to analyze professionally prepared consumer guides (e.g., tourist information; Ugglå & Olausson, 2013) or other marketing communications (e.g., magazine advertisements; Baum, 2012). The heavy bias toward professional information may unintentionally have created a tendency to over-simplify the consumers' reception of such information and downplay the importance of other sources of guidance (Olausson, 2011). Persuasive communication research tells us that people holding different values may draw different inferences from the same message (Slater & Rouner, 1996). Furthermore, individuals do not work in isolation to form their opinions but rely on peers who share their values and whom they therefore trust and understand (Metzger, Flanagin, & Medders, 2010). While the sponsors of professional information have the means to broadly circulate their definitions and meanings about sustainability (Emerich, 2011), they wield little control over the informal knowledge resources afforded by social media. In fact, consumers are increasingly turning to social media for other end-users' opinions and personal experiences which they tend to perceive as more credible than information provided by professionals or advertisers (Cheong & Morrison, 2008).

### **Naked Juice, Innocent smoothies, and the Lifestyles of Health and Sustainability**

Social media conversations around Naked Juice and Innocent smoothies provided the empirical context for this study. Naked Juice is an American brand established in 1983 and wholly owned by PepsiCo since 2007. The brand's product line comprised over 20 different varieties of fruit and vegetable beverages. Innocent is a British brand created in 1999 and majority owned by Coca-Cola since 2010. Besides its flagship line of smoothies, the Innocent brand comprises a broad range of product lines that span juices,

vegetable pots, ready meals, and children's fruit tubes and juice boxes. This study focused entirely on their line of smoothies. Both Naked Juice and Innocent smoothies are popular, mass-market products targeted at the LOHAS—lifestyles of health and sustainability—market segment.

LOHAS is a trade term and concept created to reorder the notoriously porous notion of a “green” marketplace and to describe a rapidly growing group of consumers thought to share a common set of collective well-being principles (Emerich, 2011; Ray & Anderson, 2000). Consumers embracing LOHAS are considered as subscribing to a holistic concept of health that relates personal health with the health of society and the environment (Emerich, 2011; Gerasimo, 2009). In terms of this holistic model, sustainability comprises “methods and practices that replenish and nourish rather than extract and deplete the raw materials that compose and support a human body, a community, or an ecosystem” (Emerich, 2011, p. xiv). The idea of holistic health is clearly articulated in the two products' brand statements:

What we eat not only impacts our health but also the health of the planet. So if you want to eat a sustainable diet, one that is healthy for you and the planet, what do you need to do?... We want to make sure we're doing everything we can to lower the impacts associated with making our products, whilst at the same time ensuring that they taste great and are healthy for you. Getting the right balance between impact and nutrition underpins our entire sustainability strategy. (Innocent, n.d.).

We know a healthy body doesn't mean much without a healthy world to live in. That's why at Naked we make sure that all our products make an impact that will enhance your life and the planet's. From our fruit-sourcing partnerships and our LEED-certified bottling facility to our 100 percent postrecycled reNEWabottles®,

we make our juices committed to the belief that wellness is about more than just personal health — it extends to the entire world around us, too. (Naked Juice, n.d.).

In their advertisements and product packaging, however, the idea of a sustainable lifestyle is overwhelmingly expressed in anthropocentric terms—particularly personal wellness. Apart from recycling, references to the environment on the product labels have mostly been about the ingredients and green imagery.

While both products share many similarities in their LOHAS marketing, they differ in their use of green imagery and the way nature is framed in their packaging and advertisements. Green imagery is a predominant feature of Naked Juice’s marketing communications, ranging from a small green leaf in its logo to the entire product packaging of its best-selling product, Green Machine. Nature is predominantly framed as exotic, idyllic, and pristine (cf. Ugglå & Olausson, 2013). The natural scenery in Naked Juice advertisements typically features glaring rays of sunlight and, if humans are present, a single individual engaged in a specific outdoor activity such as rock climbing or kayaking. The brand frequently plays on its Naked name to highlight not only the authentic qualities of its product ingredients (e.g., “Bare-naked fruits with no added preservatives or sugar”) but also its sustainable practices (e.g., “At naked, we take transparency to a whole new level” boasting about its renewable plastic bottles). Other claims have included “No preservative, not even if they were the last preservatives on earth,” “Replenish like nature intended,” and “As good for the environment as it is for you.” In contrast, the Innocent brand enrolls nature in a friendly and everyday manner by presenting a dynamic form of green imagery (e.g., “flying” fruits) and familiar green scenery (e.g., fields of grass in the city or countryside). The Innocent brand’s strong ethical connotation—harmless and uncorrupted—is reinforced



by an angelic halo in its logo and by using the word “pure” to underscore the product’s raw and unadulterated qualities (e.g., “100% pure fruit smoothies. No added sugar. No concentrates. No funny business,” and “The fruit, the whole fruit, and nothing but the fruit”).

### **Method and Analytical Approach**

Netnography was used to study social media conversations around the two chosen exemplars. The method is an adaptation of the participant-observation techniques of ethnography to the online context (Kozinets, 2010). While a large part of netnographic fieldwork involves gathering and coding online data, it is differentiated from the typical qualitative analyses of online content in communication research (e.g., Cooper, Green, Burningham, Evans, & Jackson, 2012; see also Langer & Beckman, 2005) by its ethnographic element of personal participation and immersion in an attempt to experience embedded cultural understanding (Kozinets, 2010). The value of netnography for communication researchers lies in its specific, proven procedural guidelines and the analytical framework it provides for studying the culture of online communities. It is thus well suited for studying the interaction between online communicative practices and the natural beverages in their wider socio-cultural context.

#### *Data Collection*

The social media analytics web application Netbase Insight Workbench was used to locate Internet postings in which the brands were mentioned (using “Naked Juice” and “Innocent smoothies” as the keywords in two separate searches). The web app sourced 7,153 posts on Naked Juice and 4,978 posts on Innocent smoothies. Data selection

proceeded in two stages. In the first stage, the large number of posts sourced was narrowed down to a more manageable yet meaningful dataset for manual inspection. The reduced dataset was required to (a) capture an appropriate range and proportion of consumer interactions and sentiments about the products; and (b) cover sites where most consumers discussing the products congregate. The web app facilitated the filtering of posts according to these guidelines in two ways. Firstly, the natural language processing engine provided automatic semantic recognition of emotions, sentiments, and interaction-oriented mentions of the products by analyzing and linking the subjects, objects, verbs, adjectives, and other linguistic patterns. Secondly, the data scoping and organizing function facilitated the comparison of the online conversation sites from which the posts had come and provided information about the sites' activity levels. The reduced dataset contained approximately 15% of the initial number of posts sourced.

In the second stage of data selection, the posts in the reduced dataset and their sources were manually inspected to collect the most relevant posts for analysis and interpretation. In judging the relevance of posts to the study's research focus, posts of an idiosyncratic or tangential nature were eschewed in favor of those which spoke directly about a healthy and/or sustainable lifestyle. For instance, the following post on [tripadvisor.com](https://www.tripadvisor.com) was not considered sufficiently relevant: "Breakfast is very good - the Innocent Smoothies for the kids were a nice touch." Although that post provides some indication of the value and meaning of Innocent smoothies, it is embedded in the wider context of a hotel review where the mention of Innocent smoothies was not integral to the conversation. The final sample comprised 344 posts about Naked Juice and 251 posts about Innocent smoothies.

### *Data Analysis and Interpretation*

To facilitate an engaged, deeper understanding of the data, the researcher and two research assistants—both regular consumers of Naked Juice and Innocent smoothies—participated offline through the use and introspection of the products and immersed themselves online by observing the communities from which the data were collected, their members, and the members' interactions. Besides popular social media platforms Twitter and Blogger, relevant conversations were concentrated on LOHAS-related blogs (e.g., [evolvingwellness.com](http://evolvingwellness.com)), product review sites (e.g., [greenoptions.com](http://greenoptions.com) and [wholefoodsmarket.com](http://wholefoodsmarket.com)), and the discussion threads of sites dealing with a wider range of topics (e.g., [netmoms.com](http://netmoms.com) and [myfitnesspal.com](http://myfitnesspal.com)).

The data analysis involved breaking down the data into its constituent elements (subject, object, descriptors, information mentioned, etc.) and reassembling it by iteratively relating “part” of the data to the emerging “whole” picture (i.e., a combination of analytical coding and hermeneutic interpretation; Kozinets, 2010). It began by closely examining all elements of a post, questioning the motives behind it, reflecting on the cultural meanings represented, and checking the interpretation against other posts. The posts were then sorted and classified through a series of part-to-whole comparisons to identify similarities and differences in ideas and descriptions. The coded data was assembled into higher-order conceptual patterns by noting the relationships that integrate the codes (categories and properties) through the contexts, conditions, and strategies which clustered together. Rather than look for any and all kinds of relationships, the process of identifying and relating codes to each other was guided by a focus on three types of consumer articulations: their descriptions of the products'

attributes and value, their everyday understandings of the products' benefits (or harm), and the way they relate the products in everyday life.

### **Findings: Negotiating the Virtuosity of Naked Juice and Innocent Smoothies**

The core feature of most conversations was articulation of the products' virtuousness (or the lack of it). These opinions seemed to stem from the posters' feelings and the culturally imbued meanings they derived from the products. The notion of virtuousness follows from Rozin, Ashmore, and Markwith's (1996) observation that consumers have a tendency to categorize food options according to a good/bad dichotomy of virtues and vices. The findings were organized into three narrative themes corresponding to the discursive strategies the posters, intentionally or unintentionally, used to draw boundaries of good and bad around the products: *highlighting*, which separates virtue from vice; *balancing*, which reconciles virtue and vice; and *resisting*, which reconstructs virtue as vice. To enhance privacy, all posts quoted as examples will be cited without indicating the poster's username.

#### *Highlighting: Separating Virtue from Vice*

The highlighting theme provides an appropriate starting point to examine the attribution of virtuousness given that it entails the "default option" of deferring to the official product information and advertised claims. The theme describes how consumers separate virtue from vice by affirming the product's claims and highlighting the advertiser's preferred meanings. For example:

*should imagine that the innocent smoothies are what it says, there is no added sugar or anything so they should be fine, I think some other brands have stuff extra put in, just read the package*

—netmums.com

*And on the food subject, I've bought myself some Innocent Smoothies (for those in the UK). They're on offer at the minute at Morrisons, about £1.40*

*It's all good stuff, and I'm in love with the Strawberry and Banana flavour. About 150 cal in a glass, and that's "2 of your 5 a day" in terms of goodness. Pretty filling too, goes well with breakfast instead of juice.*

—*forum.bodybuilding.com*

In the first excerpt, the phrases “should imagine that the innocent smoothies are what it says” and “just read the package” demonstrate a willingness to accept the claims and information provided by Innocent at face value and to rely on the information provided on the packaging as a credible way to judge products. A similar affirmative position is observed in the second excerpt where the product’s “goodness” is affirmed by highlighting specific nutritional information on the packaging—few calories per serving and providing two portions of the recommended daily intake of fruits and vegetables.

These two excerpts offer a rudimentary picture of a highlighting discursive strategy wherein consumers affirm the virtuousness of the product by selecting certain favorable attributes and making them salient in their comments. Product attributes widely perceived by readers of such sites as more desirable (virtues)—pristineness and all-natural ingredients—are emphasized while less desirable ones (vices)—sugar and calories—are downplayed. For instance, in the first excerpt, the comments “no added sugar or anything so they should be fine” and “some other brands have stuff extra put in” suggest that one criterion the poster uses to separate virtue from vice is the general pristineness of the product; more specifically, Innocent smoothies is said to be free from *added* sugar (widely recognized as a vice in such sites)—a point which omits or neglects the sugar which it naturally contains. In addition, distinctions and contrasts are made with “other brands” that lack these desirable attributes to reinforce the view that the product is virtuous.

Besides the nutritional value and material properties of the products' ingredients, consumers frequently affirmed their virtuousness by highlighting the pleasurable feelings that they attach to them:

*I found this [Innocent] smoothie to have a refreshing and very healthy taste and feel to it. With healthiness, comes peace of mind...*

—*foodstufffinds.blogspot.com*

**[Poster A:]** *For some reason, I pick up a Naked (either superfood or carrot juice) whenever I feel a little under the weather or after a late night out. I guess the look of the bottle, the text on the label and the actual texture and look of the drink make my mind believe that its super healthy. And hey, maybe it is! I do feel better after Naked :-)*

**[Poster B:]** *Since it's called Green Machine, the label and actual juice smoothie color are similar compares to the green vegetables and it sort of gives an vivid image of you becoming the Hulk after drinking this All natural 100% Naked juice smoothie.*

—*greenoptions.com*

These excerpts demonstrate how consumers actively ascribe virtuousness on the basis of the multisensory, fantasy, and emotive aspects of their experience with the products. In the first excerpt, the virtuousness of an Innocent smoothie was described as “healthiness” that comes from “a refreshing and very healthy taste and feel” and which offers the intuitive benefit of “peace of mind.” The second excerpt demonstrates how consumers appropriate the aesthetic pleasure afforded by the product to construct a “super healthy” virtuous image of Naked Juice. Poster B’s comment suggests that the virtuousness of Naked Juice stems from its being “All natural 100%” and being similar to green vegetables—widely recognized as virtuous in such contexts. But unlike the posters in the previous pair of excerpts, Poster B did not express pristineness and natural equivalence through a scientific discourse about nutrition. Rather, the green imagery was used to reinforce the virtuous credentials by acting as a symbolic resource for making cultural connections to green vegetables and to the Hulk (superhero comic book character who also happens to be green in color).

The virtuousness of the products is further represented and put into social practice through the symbolic connections that consumers make between the products and their own identities, hopes, and ideals. Consumer culture theorists suggest that consumers are drawn to a brand, at least partially, by its marketplace myths and that they use these commercially mediated meanings to construct and express their identities (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). In those terms, the highlighting theme showcases how consumers buy into the commercial myth of holistic health constructed around the products and appropriate it to communicate taste and style. For example:

*[Poster #1:] life is beautiful: I'm eating organic brick oven pizza from @wholefoods and organic superfood juice smoothie from Nakedjuice*

*[Poster #2:] I love the fact that this lady at the bus stop is drinking an organic naked juice while smoking a cigarette*

—twitter.com

By pointing to the irony of someone smoking a cigarette (vice) while drinking Naked Juice (virtue), Poster #2 not only demonstrates a moralizing categorization of virtue versus vice but also alludes to a holistic view of virtuousness which makes smoking—a terrible vice—incompatible. In the following excerpt, the poster projects a happy, fun-loving self-image and style by highlighting how the humorous packaging of Innocent smoothies constitutes an additional sign of their value on top of their more formal virtuous attributes:

*Today, I decided that Innocent Smoothies are the best type of smoothie. Not because they only use fruit and no additives, but because of the message next to the cap: "'Shake well before opening (it helps if the cap's on)'" and on the bottom of the carton: "Stop looking at my bottom". MLIA*

—mylifeisaverage.com

The two excerpts underscore Baudrillard's (1998) claim that the chief value that most consumer goods possess is not their use or exchange value but their value in signaling the consumer's status, taste, and identity.

In the course of highlighting the two products' virtuousness, their qualities are often not merely affirmed but become exaggerated or over-projected. The findings reveal that when consumers ascribed virtuousness to Innocent smoothies or Naked Juice they tended to attribute additional unsubstantiated traits or questionable benefits to the products. For instance, many posters labeled Innocent smoothies and Naked Juice as "organic" though in fact they are not. Posters also recommended a number of therapeutic applications of the products:

*[Poster I:] That's sooo last week.... No seriously, you poor thing. I recommend Sudafed, paracetamol, honey, Rubex and Innocent smoothies.*

*[Poster II:] Innocent smoothies is the best hangover cure.*

—twitter.com

*In college I found that this product [Naked Juice's Açai Machine] could stop a cold dead in its tracks. Now that I'm graduated and on my own I can't find this product at my local grocers...*

—acaiberrysite.com

*Q: Is Naked juice Green Machine flavor good for your skin? I've heard that it was, but i was curious for more opinions. if so, how much should i drink to get clear skin?*

*A: I would assume that it would be good for your skin. Blueberries are also good for clearing up skin. More importantly though, drink lots of water, and just stay away from processed or greasy foods.*

—answers.yahoo.com

These examples point to a possible virtuous halo whereby the product somehow prevents consumers from harm or neutralizes it. Chernev (2011) suggests that the halo ascribed to food that consumers deem virtuous might lead them to underestimate its calorie count or erroneously assume that it can offset the calorie content of unhealthy food (the negative calorie illusion). A similar halo effect is hinted at in the following example:

*Well there was butter, which surprised me actually because they looked dry through the glass. But I had no break-fast so anything looked yummy at that point. Also today I has a salad instead of sandwiches, and a carton of Innocent smoothie to quell the hunger pangs. I hope this health kick sticks! (Till Christmas of course)*



—*moopy.org.uk*

Despite embarking on a strict diet, the poster drank a liter (34 fl. oz.) of Innocent smoothie which contains an unhealthy level of 573 calories. This example seems to suggest that the virtuousness that the poster attaches to Innocent smoothies may have led the poster to underestimate its calorie count.

Taken together, the highlighting theme advances a romanticized view that “it’s all good” about the two products through a discursive strategy that emphasizes the positive aspects of the products and downplays or omits any negative attributes. Through highlighting, an idealized picture is formed of the two products’ virtuousness in terms of the feelings (hedonic characteristics) and the cultural meanings (symbolic characteristics) consumers ascribe to them. In hedonic terms, which concern the multisensory, fantasy, and emotive aspects of consumers’ experience with the products, *virtuousness is the feeling of healthiness*. In symbolic terms, which concern the cultural connections consumers make between the products and their own identities, hopes, and ideals, *virtuousness is the image of holistic health*.

#### *Balancing: Reconciling Virtue and Vice*

This narrative theme describes how consumers balance the ideals of healthiness with the pragmatic realities of everyday life by reconciling the virtues and vices around the consumption of Naked Juice and Innocent Smoothies. Unlike highlighting, posts with a balancing theme were less sanguine about the products’ virtues and more equivocal about their claims. For example:

*I just tried Naked juice green machine and it rocked! It says on the bottle that everything is all natural. Is this true i don't want to be addicted to something that is not good for me*

—*myfitnesspal.com*

The highlighting discursive strategy implicitly diverts attention away from the negative (vice) aspects of the product in favor of positive (virtuous) ones. In contrast, the balancing discursive strategy generally acknowledges the tensions surrounding the products' virtuousness and offers a more subdued "it isn't bad" endorsement in comparison with better and worse alternatives.

The main point of tension that posters were seeking to reconcile vis-à-vis these two products was their desire for healthiness while confronting the practicalities of everyday living. Many of the posts suggest that consumers were conscious that the more virtuous choice of actual fruits, vegetables, or a proper meal was the proper route to healthiness, but they turned to Naked Juice or Innocent smoothies in an attempt to reap equivalent benefits in a more flexible, convenient, and pleasant manner. Here are some examples:

*Thanks for the recipe, I think I'm gonna ask a blender for my birthday !!  
For now, I'm buying Innocent smoothies if you know them. It's all natural.*  
—myfitnesspal.com

*There's one problem straight away, your breakfast....  
Your breakfast fuels you for a lot of your day, you'd be better off actually having something WITH the milk, cereal..  
Innocent Smoothies are a great way of getting fruit into your diet, as well as their Innocent Veg pots which are perfect for a meal.*  
—thestudentroom.co.uk

*We buy him naked juice "green machine" and he LOVES it, and its great for getting him veggies.*  
—parents.com

*On the run or hate spinach? Try drinking your greens. I recommend Naked Juice's Green Machine-its made with real fruit juice as well as greens, so it tastes better than others.*  
—vegetarian.about.com

The virtuous attribute such posts commonly highlighted was their natural equivalence. As in the highlighting posts, natural equivalence provides a key cultural validation of the products' virtuousness and a plausible source for the feeling of healthiness and sense of well-being consuming them is perceived to impart.

The perceived virtuousness of the two brands serves as a means to mediate the displaced cultural meaning between how we ideally would like to be and how we are in reality (McCracken, 1988). A number of posts acknowledged that the products are probably not as good as even more virtuous options but said they represent either a good enough equivalent or the lesser evil when compared with vice options. The two types of balancing narratives are illustrated in the following examples:

*i have drank this [Naked Juice] during most of my time in college this was likely the main reason i stayed healthy as i did not eat too much vegetables/fruits*  
—*evolvingwellness.com*

*Yes if your kids will drink water then great...my boys won't, they like all flavours of the Innocent smoothies and these are all natural things...they'll have the high juice with sparkling water or the waitrose fruit juice cartons. I don't really see there is much wrong with this to be honest.*  
—*netmums.com*

In the first excerpt, Naked Juice was presented as a sufficiently virtuous alternative to eating vegetables and fruits in order to stay healthy. Ascribing virtuousness to Naked Juice offers the poster an opportunity to reconcile a sense of well-being with poor eating habits. In a similar vein, the second excerpt shows a poster defending her self-image as a doting and responsible parent by highlighting the product's virtuous naturalness to communicate the idea that it harmless for her children to drink Innocent smoothies. While acknowledging that drinking Innocent smoothies is not as virtuous as drinking water, the poster argues that the product is nevertheless more virtuous than what her children would ask for instead.

The posts also reveal a major point of tension concerning naturalness and sugar content. This tension is exemplified in the following excerpt:

**[Poster M:]** *They just started selling these naked juice fruit smoothies around campus and I've heard from a few friends about how good they are for you. I bought one and checked out the label and they seem to have a pretty high amount of sugar in them (usually around 30 grams I think). Does anyone know if these are*

*just natural sugars from the fruit? Or can anyone tell me if these are legit or are they just as bad for you as most of the other fru5t juices out there?*

**[Poster N:]** *Naked juice is just natural sugar to the best of my knowledge. 100% fruit jounce isn't bad for you, just not as good for you as real fruit. I'd rather eat my calories honestly.*

**[Poster M:]** *Gotcha. I just wanted to make sure cuz a lot of things claim to be natural but are natural b.s. I thought they might not be bad if I grab one every once in a while if I'm behind on my fruit for the day. Thanks for the help.*

—forums.menshealth.com

Given that naturalness is widely regarded as a virtue and sugar as a vice, it is inconceivable that an all-natural product would contain a high level of sugar. To reconcile this tension between virtue and vice, the posters tacitly accept that “natural” sugar (as opposed to added sugar) is somehow harmless owing to the virtuous halo that comes with being naturally occurring.

The balancing theme’s central message of moderation is most aptly exemplified through the tension between healthiness and tastiness. It was established earlier that pleasurable feelings, which for these posters involve a feeling of healthiness, are an important dimension of a product’s virtuousness, but pleasure was also intimately linked with how the product tastes. As the following example demonstrates, the pleasurable feelings arising from consuming a virtuous product must balance healthiness and tastiness:

**[Poster P:]** *I drink one of the Green Machine Naked drinks every day. They taste decent and I feel healthy drinking them. Whether or not they are actually healthy for me I can't say, I don't know enough about nutrition. I'm quite curious to hear some more educated opinions myself.*

**[Poster Q:]** *i wish the green one tasted horrible...i like my health drinks to taste horrible*

—10thplanetjj.com

This example points to the conflict arising from wanting to feel good from consuming a product but not necessarily wanting the product to taste too good. Consumers may be

inclined to link tastiness to unhealthiness because overindulgence in pleasure is widely considered a vice—a point that will be further developed in the next section.

*Resisting: Reconstructing Virtue as Vice*

This theme describes how consumers resisted the virtuous claims of Naked Juice and Innocent smoothies by redefining the boundaries of virtue and vice around the two products. Posts with a resisting theme were antagonistic to the products' claims and expressed a skeptical "it doesn't feel right" view of the products themselves. The resisting discursive strategy involves counternarratives which deconstruct the products' virtuousness and reconstruct the products as vices. The counternarratives generally focused on either sugar content, taste, or image. So two points of tension prominent in the balancing posts—sugar versus naturalness and taste versus healthiness—now served as the theme for counternarratives.

Sugar was a point of contention in many posts. It was used to cast doubts on the products' natural and harmless virtues and to make a cultural connection with unhealthy products (vices). As has been explained, consumers who embraced the products were observed to omit or downplay sugar as a negative attribute by either emphasizing that the products are free from added sugar, or acknowledging their sugar content but framing it as natural, and therefore harmless. In resisting posts sugar was a rallying point for skeptical posters. For example:

*90G of sugar in a liter milkshake.....Innocent Smoothies contain just fruit and nothing else, but still have more calories than the equivalent amount of coke.*  
—twitter.com

In this post, the poster is contesting the virtuous claim of Innocent smoothies by highlighting their high sugar content. But rather than make comparisons with the sugar

content of an equivalent amount of fruit, the poster's contestation appears to be based on the moral intuition that because fruits are virtuous and Coke is a vice, fruits cannot possibly contain more calories than Coke. The poster underestimates or ignores the fact that the inherent sugar content of fruit can add up if you eat or drink a lot of it. Further illustration of this virtue/vice re-negotiation is provided in the following example:

*Yeah that Naked juice is delicious but check out that sugar content!! One 15.2oz bottle has the sugar equivalent of 6, count them.. 6!!! Dunkin Donuts!! Stay away from them hon.*

—wholefoodsmarket.com

This poster disputed Naked Juice's virtuousness by juxtaposing the product with a widely recognized junk food—Dunkin Donuts—citing its similarly high sugar content.

Taste was the second major rallying point for consumers disputing the two products' virtuous status. Posters sought to reconstruct the two products as vices by actively ascribing attributes of vice—harm and overindulgence—to their taste and feel. For example:

*I didn't need to see the label to know that Naked had problems. It would give my mouth sores, give me acid reflux or a sore stomach. If you listen to your body you will be able to discern what is good for it. Thank goodness someone is giving them a slap on the wrist.*

—wholefoodsmarket.com

The poster was responding to news that a lawsuit had been filed against Naked Juice over its no preservatives claim. Unlike posters who questioned Naked Juice's virtuousness on the basis of high sugar content, the poster cited the harshness of the product to substantiate direct bodily harm. Consider another example:

*Innocent smoothie is not so innocent. It makes me feel really really fat. Or that might be the pic'n'mix and crisps I had earlier. #greedy*

—twitter.com

In this excerpt the smoothies' lack of virtue was displayed (perhaps facetiously) not merely in making the poster feel fat, but also in failing to provide a virtuous halo to shield the poster from the effects of eating other unhealthy food.

The reconstitution of virtuousness involving sugar and taste reflects the cultural subtext of consumers' general skepticism about something that feels or tastes too good. While sugar typically makes people feel good, many people are socialized not to overindulge in sweets (or pleasure in general) through their upbringing (Belk, 1988). Here are two examples of posters contesting the virtuousness of the products by invoking the social perception that harm results from overindulgence:

*I don't believe you're innocent. Anything that tastes good is not innocent, therefore innocent smoothie is not innocent...*

—twitter.com

*In terms of taste, the Green Machine tasted fantastic. In fact, a little too fantastic. I know the company says that they add no sugar whatsoever to any of their products, but I have made pure fruit smoothies at home before and have never got such a sweet taste.*

—evolvingwellness.com

The social intuition that taste and healthiness are negatively correlated (Raghunathan, Naylor, & Hoyer, 2006) was used in the two excerpts above to deconstruct the products' virtuousness.

The third element often eliciting resistance was the two products' parent corporations, whose anchor brands are familiar vices (highly processed junk food). This fact may have prompted posters to reconstruct Innocent and Naked Juice products as vices by association with the negative image of their parent brands—Coca-Cola and Pepsi respectively. For example:

*He also said that Innocent Smoothies are bad for you because they're made by Coca Cola.*

—twitter.com

This poster suggests that Innocent smoothies was somehow bad because Coca-Cola makes them. The post ought to be understood within the wider context that the formerly independent Innocent brand became majority-owned by Coca-Cola in late 2010. A significant number of Innocent's UK customers considered its sale to a big corporation as selling out its longstanding reputation as a nutritional and ethical maverick brand—hence no longer virtuous. Several posters pointed to the contradiction in values between the two products and their parent companies:

*Great recipes!! I think I found out Naked were owned by Pepsico not long ago and thought that was very depressing, so lovely and refreshing to see homemade alternatives!*

—*veganfitness.net*

*gave up buying them [Innocent Smoothies] ages ago, had to laugh at the way they painted their cleaner than clean imagine then sell out to Coca Cola, now they shrink their cartons*

—*boards.ie*

Rather than appropriating the two products as iconic resources for communicating their well-being, as observed in previous themes, consumers' resisting narratives represent symbolic dissociative practices to protect their own virtuous self-identity by abandoning the products and distancing themselves from them.

## **Discussion**

The research context of natural beverages situates this study at the intersection of health and sustainability. According to Opel, Johnston, & Wilk (2010), “food is the thin end of environmental awareness—a site where fundamental questions can begin to be asked, questions that often lead to challenging re-conceptions of our environments, our societies, and ourselves.” They argue that the intimacy of eating elicits a powerful desire to know what goes into our food and how it is produced—a line of questioning that intertwines environmental concerns with human health impacts. The findings in this



study, however, may come as a disappointment, though perhaps no surprise, to both health educators and environmental advocates. Although Naked Juice and Innocent smoothies were explicitly marketed as environmentally sustainable beverages, the posts sampled hardly mentioned environmental concerns except vicariously through anthropocentric discussions of how the products' ingredients were sourced and processed rather than their impact on environmental sustainability. And despite decades of scientific indoctrination through nutrition guidelines and the food pyramid, the findings reveal that many consumers have not lived up to the institutionally codified ideal of categorizing food according to scientific principles and properties instead of going by taste and cultural experience (Mudry, 2010). The findings indicate that some consumers may be quite adept at appropriating certain scientific concepts and technical terms such as calories, nutritional content, and recommended daily intake, but they tend to apply those concepts in a manner that is mostly qualitative and intuitive rather than quantitative and scientific.

Judged against professional nutrition and environmental discourse, it would appear that many consumers of the two products are simply too self-serving and/or irrational to truly care for their own health or the environment. Alternatively, as this article argues, the mismatch between lay and professional understandings may reflect an elitist bias and unrealistic rationalist assumptions on the part of experts and professionals. This view draws on Lakoff's (2010) assertion that professional environmentalists' understanding of rationality remains trapped in the Enlightenment conception of reason as conscious, unemotional, logical, abstract, and universal. These rationalist presumptions persist despite empirical evidence showing that ordinary people's judgment of right and wrong choices is a matter of social intuition imbued with cultural

influences rather than individual, rational reasoning (Haidt, 2001). The findings of this study demonstrate that consumer understanding of health and sustainability is heavily influenced by pleasure and cultural meanings—qualitative factors that cannot be neatly translated into quantitative technical/scientific terms. In a similar vein, Lindenfeld, Hall, McGreavy, Silka, & Hart (2012) argued that “positing knowledge as reliable, while not considering the power inherent in knowledge production, puts sustainability science at risk of undermining its core tenets” (p. 27). Privileging professional discourse as the legitimate source of knowledge is problematic because it neglects the dynamic nature of consumer knowledge and the peer resources available to consumers in forming their interpretation. Through focusing on consumers’ social media conversations, this study has underscored the role of consumers as active co-producers of value and meaning, whose word-of-mouth appropriation of professional discourse has been documented to be idiosyncratic, creative, and in many cases resistant.

This study shows that when consumers ascribe virtuousness to the two products they tend to romanticize them and attribute to them additional unsubstantiated traits or scientifically questionable benefits. This observation in itself is not novel. This study’s contribution lies in elucidating the underlying morality. Researchers have observed that moral categorization of food options may lead to a halo effect, whereby an initial favorable impression prompts people to make favorable assumptions about unrelated attributes (Schuldt, Muller, & Schwarz, 2012). For instance, studies have demonstrated that organic/natural attributes (Rozin et al., 2004), fair-trade claims (Schuldt et al., 2012), and even green colored labels (Schuldt & Schwarz, 2010) can prompt sustainability conscious consumers to perceive a product as inherently good or healthy and lead them to make unsubstantiated assumptions about its other qualities. In these

studies, a normative-descriptive approach (Bone & Corey, 1992) to morality was adopted whereby they first presume that morally oriented consumers will exhibit the halo effect and then seek to empirically establish this hypothesis. The moral rules and evaluative standards have often been treated as a cognitive “black box” and pre-defined as a person’s system of moral norms (Caruana, 2007). In contrast, the findings in this study illustrate a conception of morality that is neither fixed, nor taken for granted, nor universal. Rather, it is dynamically affirmed, negotiated, and reconstructed through communication among consumers.

### **Limitations and Further Research**

These findings must be qualified by specifying a number of limitations in the study protocol. An unobtrusive netnographic study of social media conversations facilitates the emergence of a range of dimensions not preconceived by the researcher (or the subjects) and can uncover nuances articulated in the course of the subjects’ communications that might not readily be captured in a standard survey or interview. The unelicited and naturalistic nature of the data, however, means that information gathered is unverifiable. Trolls post on all social media, and while the immersive approach of netnography may help to identify them it is not foolproof. The study is also limited by the information which could be gathered on the sites examined, so it can provide only part of a consumption story which is likely to be more multifaceted than the portrayal offered. The selection of relevant and interaction-oriented mentions of the two products might have privileged posts and comments by active users and more vocal consumers. It might also have over-emphasized certain aspects of the products or types of consumption activities that are more amenable to discussion. These weaknesses limit

the study's ability to offer conclusions that are reliably generalizable across various contexts.

The findings require further empirical verification in other consumption contexts. Several concepts explored in this study might reasonably be extended to other product categories. For instance, the intuition about harm and indulgence being associated with synthetic ingredients suggests that people tend to regard eco-products as safer and gentler because they are all-natural. It is likely that these virtuous attributes may be similarly valued for other products that we ingest or apply to our bodies such as body creams and lotions, but not perhaps for products such as recycled bags. Future studies should also take heed of the role of pleasurable feelings and symbolic connections to the way consumers construe a natural product's virtuousness as noted in this study. For example, the social processes involved with these two qualitative factors might provide theoretical insights beyond Rozin et al.'s (2004) observation that people's preference for natural is more substantial and stronger for food than for medicines. It was observed that posters appropriate green imagery to create a romanticized image of the product and to conjure benefits beyond its stated claims. Further research is required to verify whether the different ad appeals used lead consumers to expect certain benefits from the product and to clarify their differential effects. Naked Juice appears to depend more on green imagery and has framed nature as exotic and idyllic in its marketing communications, while Innocent has framed nature on more familiar terms and used more dynamic green imagery. These different advertising executions might have influenced the way consumers posted about the two products. For instance, posters who expressed favorable sentiments tended to mention the green imagery of Naked Juice,

whereas for Innocent they mentioned the humorous marketing communications more often.

This article contributes to a small but growing stream of studies which seek to readdress the media-centrism of environmental communication research (Olausson, 2011) by giving greater attention to how people negotiate nature and sustainability (e.g., Cooper et al., 2012). In particular, the dynamic conception of morality and the three discursive strategies developed here may help to inform future studies seeking to analyze consumer discourse on sustainability issues. A more explicit comparison of advertiser (media) framing and consumer (audience) framing of nature and sustainability may be warranted in subsequent studies to further bridge the gap between lay and professional conceptions of these topics.

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