Naturally traditional or traditionally natural – exploring the concepts *natural* and *traditional* in marketing research[*]

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Abstract

The purpose of this research is to understand how current marketing research conceptualises natural and traditional products – products that strongly attract consumer attention and capture large and growing market shares yet remain vague and weakly defined by a regulatory framework. The analysis is conducted on systematically selected research articles published in relevant journals over the past two decades. The results show that the natural products are mostly defined by the way they are produced and the ingredients they do not contain, while no consensus was reached for the traditional products. Furthermore, not only is the concept of traditional defined by an unusually large number of themes, but the themes also vary considerably depending on stakeholder group from which they originate, indicating an inevitable communication problem between these groups. The results also show that despite attempts by marketers to link the meanings of the two types of products, the themes in the definitions of natural and traditional products are different and overlap only sporadically. These findings serve as a step toward creating better academic conceptualizations and a more specific regulatory framework for natural and traditional products that will reduce the likelihood of misleading business practises and confusion among consumers and researchers.

***Key words:** natural products, traditional products, ingredients, production, origin*

***JEL classification:** M31, M38*

1. Introduction

Many global consumer trends are about going back to roots, buying local and natural products from conscious producers, and retreating to personal safe spaces to look after body, mind, and soul (Angus and Westbrook, 2020). As a result, many brands, especially those related to food, claim properties like fresh, local, sustainable, organic, natural, or artisan (Cozzio et al., 2020; Del Gigante, 2013). While some claims reflect clearly defined standards granted by institutions and represented by labels, e.g., Organic product or Protected designation of origin (Borec et al., 2017), many are vague and outside the legally binding frameworks (Berry et al., 2017; Hemmerling et al., 2016; Trichopoulou et al., 2007; Wenzig and Gruchmann, 2018). Expectedly, this causes consumer confusion (Gifford and Bernard, 2011; McFadden and Huffman, 2017), frustration (Anthopoulou, 2013), and lawsuits (Berry et al., 2017; Petty, 2015).

Among the commonly used, under-defined marketing claims, the concepts *natural* and *traditional* arguably require the most attention from researchers for three reasons:

1) Products with these claims occupy huge, ever-growing market shares. The term natural *"has been attached to food products whenever possible"* (Rozin et al., 2012: 449) to become the most common food and beverage claim, used for about a quarter of the products on the market (Cao and Yan 2016; Mintel, 2008). Similarly, traditional food is one of the fastest-growing food trends since the early 2000s (Nikolić et al*., 2014; Savelli et al., 2019).

2) Both concepts are complex, each with several conceptual meanings. Natural is a common polysemy (a multiple-meaning word) used in marketing (ThoughtCo, 2019) and can represent nutritive suitability, lack of human influence, familiarity, and more (Siipi, 2013). Similarly, traditional is defined in relation to origin, way of production, familiarity, habit, and more (Guerrero et al., 2009; 2010; Wang et al., 2016; Vanhonacker et al., 2013).

3) Both these concepts have a strong symbolic meaning related to a homemade product from an idyllic family farm (e.g., Cerjak et al., 2014; Rozin et al., 2012), and relate to consumer intentions to live a healthier life and consume high quality products (Nikolić et al., 2014). For these reasons, their conceptualizations are seemingly intertwined, i.e.:

- traditional product associations include those central to the natural products like: natural raw materials (Chung and Hu, 2018; Hafsi and Hu, 2016), no food additives (Bobe et al., 2016), produced in a natural way (Cerjak et al., 2014; Nikolić et al., 2014; Rudawska, 2014), and little or no processing (Guerrero et al., 2009; Vanhonacker et al., 2010),

- natural product definition by USDA (2005), a frequently quoted definition, considers minimal processing one of the main characteristics of natural food and further specifies it as traditional processing used to make the food edible.

Prior research acknowledges that these two concepts have been underdefined (Berry et al., 2017; Hemmerling et al., 2016; Hidalgo-Milpa et al*.,* 2016; Kumar et al., 2021; McFadden and Huffman, 2017; Trichopoulou et al., 2007) and addresses the issue by either quoting a limited legal regulation (e.g., Balogh et al., 2016; Syrengelass et al., 2018; Gheorghe et al., 2013), by endeavouring to understand one of the concepts, most often from consumer standpoint (e.g., Cerjak et al., 2014; Guerrero et al., 2009; Wang et al., 2016; Čut and Pandža Bajs, 2016; Rozin et al., 2012), or by quoting previous studies (e.g., Boncinelli et al., 2017; Davis and Burton, 2019; Hemmerling et al., 2016; Savelli et al., 2019). Since there is no consensus on a dominant definition regarding either of the concepts, it remains unclear whether the many existing conceptualizations currently used in academic research diverge towards many different themes or converge to a few ones, i.e., whether current research adds to the confusion currently present in the marketplace or contributes to its resolution. Also, although views of different stakeholder groups (consumers, professionals, policymakers, and researchers) are at the background of different definitions, no attempts have been made to examine differences or resemblances among these groups' views. Finally, despite the above clear indications that a conceptual relationship between natural and traditional products exists, prior research concentrates on one or the other, neglecting their relationship in the process and so preventing convergence or delineation of the two concepts.

Considering the identified research gaps, the purpose of the present research is to thoroughly explore how are natural and traditional products defined in marketing research and answer the following research questions:

- RQ1: a) what are the main themes in the definitions of natural and traditional products in marketing research, and b) how do these themes differ between definitions coming from different stakeholders and

- RQ2: what are the divergent and overlapping thematic points between the conceptualizations of natural and traditional products.

The results should contribute to researchers and practitioners. To the former, it is important to delineate the domain to understand the studied phenomenon and avoid confusion in future research. To the latter, a clear definition would prevent misleading business practices, which is encouraged by Council directive 2005/29/EC (2005), reduce consumer confusion and eliminate potential lawsuits.

The article consists of six chapters. Chapter 2 provides an overview of how prior research addresses definitional ambiguities of natural and traditional products.

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Chapter 3 explains the methods applied in data gathering and analysis, while Chapter 4 presents the empirical data and analysis. Then, Chapter 5 discusses the main findings and implications, while Chapter 6 presents conclusions, limitations and directions for future research.

2. Literature review

As elaborated in the introduction, prior research clearly points out to the lack of agreement on what natural and traditional products represent (Berry et al., 2017; Hemmerling et al., 2016; Hidalgo-Milpa et al., 2016; Kumar et al., 2021; McFadden and Huffman, 2017) and addresses the issue in one of the three approaches described below.

The first approach is to quote a legal regulation. The challenge with this approach is the limited legal framework for the two concepts. Guidelines exist for the natural claim, but only for some products in some countries. In that regard, Petty (2015) undertook a historical review of the existing regulative framework for natural claims in the USA to conclude that the guidelines developed over the years agree that foods promoted as natural "should not contain artificial or synthetic ingredients and should be minimally processed" (Petty, 2015: 131). Relatedly, most prior research (e.g., Berry et al., 2017; Syrengelas et al., 2018) on natural products is conducted in the USA and draws upon the definition by the USDA, which declares that the term natural may be used providing: "(1) the product does not contain any artificial flavor or flavoring, coloring ingredient, or chemical preservative (as defined in 21 CFR 101.22), or any other artificial or synthetic ingredient; and (2) the product and its ingredients are not more than minimally processed. Minimal processing may include: (a) those traditional processes used to make food edible or to preserve it or to make it safe for human consumption, e.g., smoking, roasting, freezing, drying, and fermenting, or (b) those physical processes which do not fundamentally alter the raw product and/ or which only separate a whole, intact food into component parts, e.g., grinding meat, separating eggs into albumen and yolk, and pressing fruits to produce juices" (USDA, 2005: 109). On the other hand, most research on traditional products is conducted in the EU (e.g., Balogh et al., 2016; Cerjak et al., 2014; Rudawska, 2014) and the most quoted regulatory framework is Regulation (EU) 1151/2012 on quality schemes for agricultural products and foodstuffs, or related national legislations. This Regulation defines the term traditional in order to regulate the use of the Traditional specialty guaranteed quality label and states that traditional means "proven usage on the domestic market for a period that allows transmission between generations; this period is to be at least 30 years" (Regulation (EU) 1151/2012: 8). Although the Regulation underwent changes over the years, the definition of traditional has remained largely the same.

The second approach that researchers apply to address the fact that traditional and natural concepts are under-defined is to try to understand them. Most research that chooses such an approach explores consumer associations or meanings of traditional (e.g., Cerjak et al., 2014; Guerrero et al., 2010; Wang et al., 2016) or natural products (e.g., Čut and Pandža Bajs, 2016; Rozin et al., 2012). Guerrero et al. (2009) went further to not only discover a set of associations but propose a consumer-driven definition for traditional food products. Their definition states that traditional food is: "a product frequently consumed or associated with specific celebrations and/or seasons, normally transmitted from one generation to another, made accurately in a specific way according to the gastronomic heritage, with little or no processing/manipulation, distinguished and known because of its sensory properties and associated with a certain local area, region or country" (Guerrero et al. 2009: 348). In rare cases when researchers try to understand one of these two concepts, they examine experts' perspective to propose an expert-based definition. For example, Trichopoulou et al. (2007) query the clarity of the term *traditional* in Regulation 2082/92 (an earlier version of the current above quoted Regulation (EU) 1151/2012). Based on rounds of scientific workshops, Trichopoulou et al. (2007: 424) conceptualized traditional as "conforming to established practice or specifications prior to the Second World War". Furthermore, they argue that traditional food is "of a specific feature or features, which distinguish it clearly from other similar products of the same category in terms of the use of "traditional ingredients" (raw materials or primary products), "traditional composition" or "traditional type of production and/or processing method."" and further specify each of the three key terms of the definition. According to them, traditional ingredients are a "raw material (species and/or varieties) or primary product, either alone or as an ingredient, that has been used in identifiable geographical areas and remains in use today", traditional composition is "the uniquely identifiable composition (in terms of ingredients) that was first established prior to the Second World War and passed down through generations by oral or other means", while a traditional type of production and/or processing is one that is "transmitted from generation to generation through oral tradition or other means and has been applied prior to the Second World War and remains in use". Finally, they stress that the ingredients, composition, or production can be abandoned and then reinstated, and that production can be adjusted to hygiene regulations or the technological progress if they remain in line with original methods and the food's intrinsic features are unaltered.

The third approach to addressing definitional ambiguities of the natural and traditional concepts is quoting prior research. Among the many different papers quoted, the most often quoted include: Bertozzi (1998), Jordana (2000), Trichopoulou et al. (2007) and Guerrero et al. (2009; 2010) for traditional products, and Rozin et al. (2012) and Rozin (2005) for natural products.

Finally, past research mostly focuses on either natural or traditional products. Only few studies compare these two product types (e.g., First Komen et al., 2021), or similar ones like organic and traditional products (e.g., Nikolić et al., 2014) or natural and regional products (e.g., Umberger et al., 2009) in terms of the differences in consumer preferences, perceived benefits, or willingness to pay. However, so far research was not concerned with comparing what these two product types represent and whether their definitions suggest their convergence or delineation.

3. Methods

To address the specifics of the qualitative data required by the purpose of this research, several procedures were introduced to ensure validity of the findings. The first subchapter explains sampling procedures applied to select relevant articles and definitions, while the second content analysis procedures.
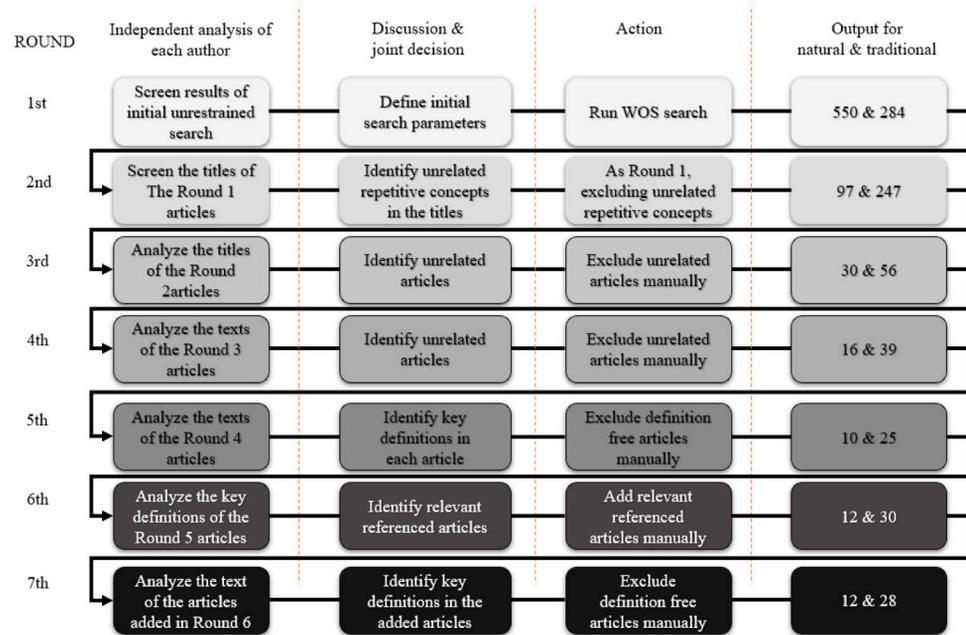
3.1. Sampling procedure

To systematically select relevant, high-quality marketing research that deals with conceptual definitions of traditional and natural products, guidelines by Paul and Criado (2020) were followed. The initial search parameters focused on articles published in journals indexed in *WoS SSCI*: *Business* and *Agricultural Economics and Policy* research areas that included *natural** or *traditional** in the titles to ensure that the concepts studied were central to an article and therefore expected to be clearly defined. To include only contemporary, research-based content, *articles* published between *2000 and 2020* were considered. In this period traditional food consumption emerged as one of the fastest growing food trends in the USA and Europe (Savelli et al., 2019), while natural was the most common food and beverage claim (Cao and Yan, 2016). In addition, Paul and Criado (2020) argue that a systematic literature review should cover at least 10 years, whereas a period of 20 to 30 years is common. Finally, only *English-language* articles were selected to avoid losing meaning in translation.

The initial search parameters yielded 550 articles for natural and 284 for traditional concepts. Then, a multiple-round procedure (figure 1), enabled careful exclusion of the articles that did not relate to the study. Specifically, in the second round, title analysis, identified frequent unrelated concepts (e.g., natural: resource, gas, experiment; and traditional: media, advertising), and automatically eliminated articles with those themes. In the third round, each author individually evaluated each remaining title and coded articles as: unrelated or potentially related to the study. The observed intercoder agreement was 89% for natural and 90% for traditional. At this stage, only articles by both authors defined as unrelated were

excluded. In the fourth round, the remaining articles were full-text analysed and again coded as unrelated or potentially related to the study. Now, the intercoder agreement was 100% for natural and 93% for traditional. Each article was discussed before reaching an exclusion decision. This round ended with 16 articles on natural and 39 articles on traditional products.

Figure 1: The relevant articles selection protocol

ROUND	Independent analysis of each author	Discussion & joint decision	Action	Output for natural & traditional
1st	Screen results of initial unrestrained search	Define initial search parameters	Run WOS search	550 & 284
2nd	Screen the titles of The Round 1 articles	Identify unrelated repetitive concepts in the titles	As Round 1, excluding unrelated repetitive concepts	97 & 247
3rd	Analyze the titles of the Round 2 articles	Identify unrelated articles	Exclude unrelated articles manually	30 & 56
4th	Analyze the texts of the Round 3 articles	Identify unrelated articles	Exclude unrelated articles manually	16 & 39
5th	Analyze the texts of the Round 4 articles	Identify key definitions in each article	Exclude definition free articles manually	10 & 25
6th	Analyze the key definitions of the Round 5 articles	Identify relevant referenced articles	Add relevant referenced articles manually	12 & 30
7th	Analyze the text of the articles added in Round 6	Identify key definitions in the added articles	Exclude definition free articles manually	12 & 28

Source: authors' research

In the fifth round, a special protocol ensured that the key definition(s) in the articles were identified. That is, the articles were looked through from end to beginning to find a definition, because the more central a definition is to the main goal of the article, the later in the article it appears. That is, if the main goal of an article was to define a concept, a definition (or a set of associations for understanding the concept) should appear at the end of the article as a research output. If an article was not about defining a concept, the next place to look for a definition was in the methods chapter, as it could have been used as a research input (i.e., as a rule for including cases in the case study approach or as a suggestion for respondents in the survey-based approach). If the concept was neither a research output nor a research input, the definition was sought at the beginning of the article as it could have also served to set the stage in the Introduction or Literature Review chapters. This procedure discovered that for both concepts, one-third of the articles did not

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contain a definition, so these articles were excluded in this round, while at the same time some articles contained multiple definitions in one of the protocol steps; in this case, all these definitions were used for the analysis.

Finally, in the sixth round of the relevant articles' selection protocol (figure 1) the definitions selected in the fifth round were analysed to find references to prior research. The cited articles were included in the sample if they were SSCI-indexed and met the technical parameters established in the first round of the protocol (articles, English, 2000 –2020). If the cited articles did not clearly define the concepts under study (according to the definition selection protocol established in the fifth round), they were excluded in the final, seventh, round.

3.2. Content analysis procedure

MAXQDA software was used to create a codebook. First, each author independently performed inductive open coding as advised by Corbin and Strauss (2015). Then the identified codes were analysed, merged where necessary, and structured into three levels in a bottom-up approach, as recommended by Kalpokaite and Radivojevic (2019). The bottom level comprised data-driven codes (the *meaning* codes). Grouping these codes defined the middle level codes (the *theme* codes) and the top level conceptual codes (the *category* codes). The dataset was then coded on a trial basis using the codebook but remaining open for necessary additions. Minor changes were made to the meaning codes at this stage. The final category and theme codes were:

- Ingredients (*Free from* and *Comprised of*),

- Production (*Way of Production*, *Longevity of Production*, and *Place of Production*),

- Consumption (*Way of Consumption*, *Longevity of Consumption*, and *Place of Consumption),*

- Origin (*Gastronomic and Cultural Heritage*, *Longevity of Existence*, and *Place of Origin*),

- Consequences (*Attributes*, *Consumer Benefits*, and *Community Benefits*).

These codes alone served to find the answers to RQ1a and RQ2 of the research, i.e., identify the main themes in the definitions of natural and traditional products and to identify divergent and overlapping points of the two concepts.

In addition to the data-driven, content-based codes, two other sets of codes were used. The first set specifies the origin of the definitions, i.e., a stakeholder group behind the definition. In combination with the main coding set, this was used to

find answers to RQ1b of the research, i.e., to compare whether the identified themes differed between the stakeholder groups. This coding set included:

- policymakers (definitions based on legal regulations),

- professionals (definitions based on producers' opinions or producer association documents),

- consumers (definitions based on B2C or B2B consumer opinions), and

- researchers:

  - prior research (definitions based on prior academic research),

  - author opinion (definitions provided by the authors of the research papers without reference to prior research).

Finally, the second additional set of codes specifies the role that a definition had in its original paper as defined in the previous subchapter:

- setting the stage,

- a research input, and

- a research output.

This coding set allowed describing a sample in relation to the definition selection protocol.

Having compiled the codebook, each author coded the data set individually. The intercoder agreement was 86%, which is acceptable according to Campbell et al. (2013). Authors discussed the coding differences and agreed on the final codes for each disagreement.

4. Empirical data and analysis

This chapter presents empirical data organized in four subchapters. The chapter starts with the sample analysis, followed by individual content analysis of the natural and the traditional product definitions, and ends with a comparison of the two products' definitions.

4.1. Sample analysis

The articles selection protocol produced 18 relevant articles for natural products (16 in the 4th round and 2 in the 6th round of the protocol depicted in Figure 1) and 44 relevant articles for traditional products (39 in the 4th round and 5 in the

6th round). The analysis revealed that not only did no article examine both types of products, but that two completely distinct groups of authors examined the two concepts. In addition, the articles were published in 29 different journals, of which only five covered both natural and traditional products. The British Food Journal published most of the selected articles, i.e., 2 on natural and 15 on traditional products; Food Policy followed with 2 articles on natural and 3 on traditional products. Although articles on each concept were mainly about food, traditional products were most frequently mentioned in journals about food or agriculture, whereas natural products were mentioned in journals from a wider range of fields, from food and agriculture to economics and marketing. Finally, both concepts were studied primarily in the second half of the studied period, with only two articles published before 2009. This suggests that interest in this topic has increased in the last decade compared to previous years.

Table 1: Role of the definitions and their origin

		Policymakers (legal regulations)	Consumers	Professionals	Researchers	
					Prior research	Author opinion
Setting the Stage	Natural	2		2	1	
	Traditional	3.5*		1.5*	18*	1
Research Input	Natural	4		1	1	
	Traditional	4		1	3	4
Research Output	Natural	1	1		1	
	Traditional		8			

* Two definitions were based on two origins so 0.5 was ascribed to each origin.

Source: Authors' research

Having described the sample in terms of relevant articles, the sample is now described in terms of relevant definitions. The definition selection protocol yielded a total of 14 definitions for natural products and 44 definitions for traditional products. As Table 1 shows, most definitions quote prior research (23 only prior research and 2 combine prior research with other origins). Further insight into the cited prior research reveals that nearly half of definitions in this category relate to research that examined consumer perceptions of the concepts and one third to papers in which authors expressed opinions about what natural or traditional products represented without specifying what their opinions were based on.

4.2. Natural product definitions content analysis

Table 2 presents the results of the content analysis of definitions for natural products. The first row of the table contains a breakdown of the definitions by origin, i.e.,

stakeholder group (so that the sum of all the columns is 100%). The other rows of the table illustrate the importance of each category and theme within the definitions of a stakeholder group (so that, for example, 86% under the policymakers' column, means that 86% of all definitions by policymakers refer to Ingredients).

The analysis revealed that the definitions are mostly based on legal regulations, by far most often quoting the USDA's definition presented in Chapter 2. Regardless of the origin, the definitions are similar and revolve around two main themes: the Ingredients-related theme *Free from* and the Production-related theme *Way of Production.* Apart from these two, the Origin-related theme *Place of Origin* is often found in definitions based on prior research but not so often elsewhere. Other themes are rarely mentioned, and many are missing altogether (hence not listed in the table).

Table 2: Central themes in natural product definitions by origin

	Policymakers	Consumers	Professionals	Prior research	Total
Total	**50%**	**7%**	**21%**	**21%**	**100%**
Ingredients	**86%**	**100%**	**67%**	**67%**	**79%**
Free From	86%	100%	67%	67%	79%
Comprised of	0%	0%	33%	0%	7%
Production	**86%**	**100%**	**100%**	**67%**	**86%**
Way of Production	86%	100%	100%	67%	86%
Consumption	**0%**	**0%**	**0%**	**33%**	**7%**
Way of Consumption	0%	0%	0%	33%	7%
Origin	**14%**	**0%**	**33%**	**67%**	**29%**
Place of Origin	14%	0%	33%	67%	29%
Consequences	**0%**	**0%**	**0%**	**33%**	**7%**
Consumer Benefits	0%	0%	0%	33%	7%

Source: Authors' research

The following list presents the meanings (the bottom level, data driven codes) that dominate the three most frequently identified themes (the middle level codes):

- *Way of Production: minimally processed* (e.g., Petty, 2015; Syrengelas et al., 2018; Rozin et al., 2012), *not transformed by human hand* (e.g., Rozin et al., 2012; Siipi, 2013),

- *Free from: free from chemicals and artificial additives (*e.g., Berry et al., 2017; McFadden and Huffman, 2017; Petty, 2015), and

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- *Place of Origin: derived from nature* (e.g., Berry et al., 2017; Davis and Burton, 2019).

4.3. Traditional product definitions content analysis

Like natural products, the definitions of traditional products were classified into the same five categories and their themes (Table 3). Likewise, the first row of the table shows the breakdown of the definitions according to the origin, i.e., stakeholder group while the other rows show the importance of each category and theme within the definitions of a stakeholder group.

Table 3: Central themes in traditional product definitions by origin

	Policy-makers	Consum-ers	Profes-sionals	Prior research	Author opinion	Total
Total	**17%**	**18%**	**6%**	**48%**	**11%**	**100%**
Ingredients	**33%**	**25%**	**60%**	**14%**	**80%**	**30%**
Free from	13%	0%	0%	0%	0%	2%
Comprised of	33%	25%	60%	14%	80%	30%
Production	**47%**	**75%**	**60%**	**81%**	**80%**	**73%**
Longevity of Production	0%	25%	0%	10%	20%	11%
Place of Production	7%	38%	0%	21%	60%	25%
Way of Production	47%	75%	60%	67%	60%	64%
Origin	**73%**	**100%**	**40%**	**83%**	**60%**	**80%**
Cultural & Gastro. Heritage	7%	63%	40%	26%	60%	34%
Place of Origin	27%	63%	0%	57%	0%	43%
Longevity of Existence	60%	38%	0%	60%	40%	50%
Consumption	**13%**	**63%**	**40%**	**38%**	**0%**	**34%**
Longevity of Consumption	0%	0%	40%	5%	0%	5%
Place of Consumption	0%	0%	0%	5%	0%	2%
Way of Consumption	13%	63%	40%	33%	0%	32%
Consequences	**27%**	**88%**	**80%**	**43%**	**0%**	**45%**
Community Benefits	0%	13%	0%	0%	0%	2%
Consumer Benefits	0%	50%	40%	10%	0%	16%
Attributes	27%	38%	80%	43%	0%	36%

Source: Authors' research

Unlike definitions for natural products, which often originate from policymakers, definitions for traditional products do not. Only one paper refers to Regulation (EU) 1151/2012 and another two papers to its earlier version (Council Regulation

(EC) 509/2006). Consequently, when the relevant EU Regulation is quoted, 25 years (Pieniak et al., 2009), 30 years (Balogh et al., 2016), and 50 years (Kühne et al., 2015) are defined as the minimum time required for the product to be on the market to be considered traditional. The comprehensive definition by Trichopoulou et al. (2007) presented in Chapter 2 is referred to in several definitions, but once (Rudawska, 2014) in its entirety. Finally, most definitions of traditional products quote prior research that frequently provides consumer-based definitions; the most widely quoted is the one provided by Guerrero et al. (2009).

Overall, definitions of traditional products were content-wise far more diverse than the natural product definitions. The Production-related theme *Way of Production* is the most frequent and the only theme found often in the definitions regardless of their origin. However, the analysis at the more abstract level of data (i.e., categories codes), reveals that the most common category is Origin rather than Production, with three themes (*Longevity of Existence*, *Place of Origin,* and *Cultural and Gastronomic Heritage*) each dominating the definitions of a different stakeholder group. Furthermore, the results show that definitions of policymakers focus on the Origin-related theme of *Longevity of Existence*, while other stakeholder groups' definitions focus on many different categories and themes. Moreover, themes appear very unevenly across different origins. Specifically, consumer-based definitions cover a wide spectrum of themes like: *Way of Production*, *Cultural and Gastronomic Heritage*, *Place of Origin*, *Way of Consumption*, and *Consumer Benefits*, professionals-based definitions include *Comprised of*, *Way of Production*, and *Attributes*, the prior-research-based definition often cover themes like *Way of Production*, *Place of Origin* and *Longevity of Existence* while author-opinion-based very often include themes like *Comprised of*, *Place of Production*, *Way of Production* and *Cultural and Gastronomic heritage.*

The following list presents the most common meanings (bottom level data-driven codes) within the identified main themes (middle level codes):

- *Way of Production: distinguished processing* (e.g., Bobe et al., 2016; Guerrero et al., 2010), *made according to gastronomic heritage* (e.g., Guerrero et al., 2009; Kühne et al., 2013; Rudawska, 2014),

- *Longevity of Existence: transmitted over generations* (e.g., Boncinelli et al., 2017; Cerjak et al., 2014), *existing over a long time* (e.g., Balogh et al., 2016; Kühne et al., 2015),

- *Place of Origin: associated with location, region, or country* (e.g., Boncinelli et al., 2017; Guerrero t al., 2009; Pieniak et al., 2013),

- *Attributes: distinguished sensory properties* (e.g., Guerrero et al., 2009; Rudawska, 2014; Vanhonacker et al., 2010),

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- *Cultural and Gastronomic Heritage: part of cultural or gastronomic heritage* (e.g., Savelli et al., 2019; Serrano-Cruz, 2018),

- *Way of Consumption: frequently consumed / habit* (e.g., Bobe et al., 2016; Pieniak et al., 2009), *consumed on special occasions* (e.g., Boncinelli et al., 2017; Guerrero et al., 2009)

- *Comprised of: authentic raw materials* (e.g., Gellynck et al, 2012; Molnár et al., 2011; Rudawska, 2014),

- *Place of Production: produced locally, regionally, or nationally* (e.g., Gellynck et al., 2012; Gockowski et al., 2003; Molnár et al., 2011), and

- *Consumer Benefits: healthy* (e.g., Hidalgo-Milpa et al., 2016; Guerrero et al., 2010).

4.4. At the crossroads between natural and traditional products

The comparative analysis of natural and traditional products is depicted in Figure 2. Categories and themes primarily relevant to natural products are shaded black, primarily relevant to traditional products are shaded white, similarly relevant to both are shaded dark grey, and relevant to neither are shaded light grey.

Figure 2: At the crossroads between natural (N) and traditional (T)
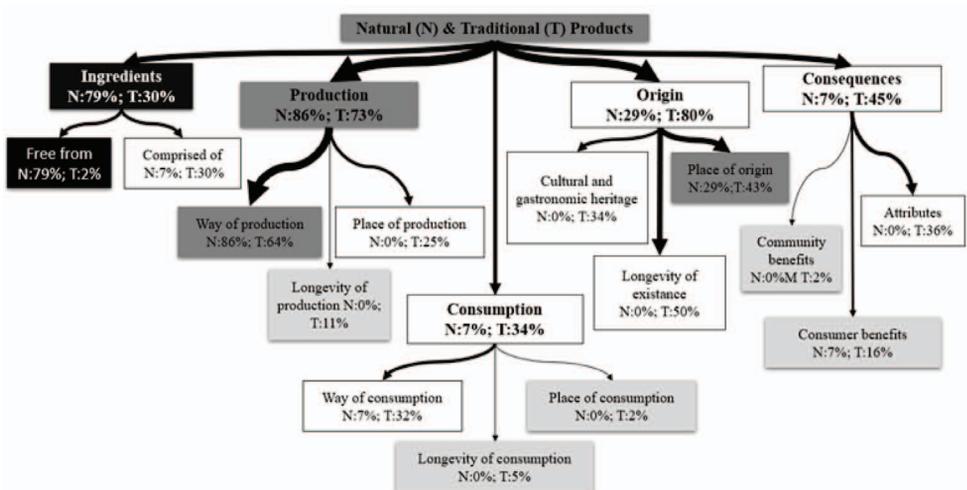
Source: Authors' research

Specifically, category Ingredients (especially *Free from*) belongs to natural products, while Consumption (especially *Way of Consumption*), Origin (especially

Longevity of Existence and *Cultural and Gastronomic Heritage*)*,* and Consequences (especially *Attributes*) belong to traditional products. Both sets of definitions often mention Production (especially *Way of Production*) although meanings are different, i.e., *minimally processed* (for natural) vs. *distinguished processing* and *made according to gastronomic heritage* (for traditional). The other theme found in both types of products, *Place of Origin,* also differs in meanings for the two types of products, i.e., *derived from nature* (for natural) vs. *associated with location, region, or country* (for traditional).

5. Results and discussion

Previous research shows that natural and traditional products have large and growing market shares (Cao and Yan 2016; Savelli et al., 2019), and consumer interest in these two products is unlikely to wane (Angus and Westbrook, 2020). Yet, these types of products are not well defined (Berry et al., 2017; Hemmerling et al., 2016; Hidalgo-Milpa et al., 2016; McFadden and Huffman, 2017). While previous research has addressed definitional ambiguity by relying on one of the many existing vaguely specified definitions, citing limited legal regulations, or examining consumer perceptions of the concepts, this research took a different approach. The purpose of this research was to examine the themes currently used in academic research in the conceptualization of natural and traditional products. This approach made it possible to contribute to current research by revealing whether academic research is helping to resolve the definitional ambiguity that exists in the marketplace or adds to the confusion. Furthermore, by revealing the potentially different languages that different stakeholders speak when referring to natural and traditional products, this research also contributes to bridging the gap between the narratives and understandings of different stakeholders. This paves the way for authentic producers of natural and traditional products to better align their production and marketing activities to become stronger market players, which ultimately promotes overall economic growth, especially in rural communities.

The results show that the definitions based on legal frameworks (mainly USDA, 2005 and Regulation (EU) 1151/2012) thematically converge to only three categories, each with one theme. For natural products, these are Ingredients (theme *Free from*) and Production (theme *Way of Production*), and for traditional products, Origin (theme *Longevity of Existence*). In contrast, an analysis of the full set of the definitions found in systematically selected academic research, reveals a more complex situation. The definitions of natural and traditional products both include all three categories mentioned in the legal regulations but also an additional two: Consumption and Consequences. Moreover, within these five categories, the definitions of natural products include six different themes and those of traditional products as many as fourteen. Further, the definitions of natural products are quite

consistent in that, regardless of the stakeholder group from which they originate, the two main themes (*Free from* and *Way of Production*) dominate the content. On the other hand, the themes of traditional products are remarkably diverse and dependent on the stakeholder group from which they originate. This points to the misunderstandings that exist among the stakeholder groups when they refer to traditional products. It also points to misunderstanding among researchers who use various conceptualisations to research traditional products. Moreover, current research on traditional products often provides consumer-driven definitions to set the stage or as a field research input, which is not ideal as the consumer perspective mostly represents association-based processing, which is unlike rule-based processing not rigorous enough to define a research concept (cf. Sloman, 1996).

Finally, although current marketing communication tends to create the idyllic image of a product that is both natural and traditional (Nikolić et al., 2014), and despite many definitions that suggest a conceptual overlap of these two product types (e.g., Chung and Hu, 2018; Hafsi and Hu, 2016; Bobe et al., 2016; Cerjak et al., 2014; Nikolić et al., 2014; Rudawska, 2014; Guerrero et al., 2009; Vanhonacker et al., 2010; USDA, 2005), current efforts to understand the two have not attempted to compare and delineate one from the other. The results of this study show that the definitions originating from the legal regulations completely distinguish these two concepts. Even when comparing the full set of the observed definitions, the definitions of the two concepts still largely diverge. Most of the themes are specific to either natural or traditional products; and even when there is overlap between the themes, as in the case of *Way of Production* or *Place of Origin*, the concrete meanings of these themes are specific to each of the two types of products.

6. Conclusion

The results presented provide answers to the research questions raised in the introduction. First, marketing research considers the way of production and the missing ingredients as the main themes in defining natural products, while it has not reached a consensus for traditional products. Second, the perspectives of the various stakeholders considered in academic research in the conceptualization of traditional products differ considerably. Third, the academic conceptualizations of the two products under study do not have many thematic overlaps. Implications for various stakeholders arise from these conclusions. Although traditional and natural products are each concisely defined in the existing legal framework, the legal framework is limited nation and product wise. If these concepts were afforded a legal regulation that was binding on all product categories worldwide, they would also be more delineated in practitioners' promotional messages. Current court cases are already urging policymakers to be more diligent in defining the concepts. In the meantime, academic

research should not be biased because of inadequacies in the legal framework but should help establish common ground. Experts, rather than consumers as is the case with current academic research on traditional products, should play an important role in formulating definitions. Further, although marketers currently benefit from consumers' preference for natural and traditional products and the limited legal framework for the use of these claims, consumers may soon lose confidence in overused (and misused) claims and turn their heads and wallets elsewhere. Therefore, it is also in marketers' best interest to be more authentic and use these claims wisely. By mapping the main meanings that different stakeholders associate with natural and traditional products, this study makes an important contribution to marketers who claim their products are natural or traditional. That is, by knowing the views of policymakers, marketers can adjust their products and production to what may soon be a legally binding regulation. Similarly, knowing what consumers mean by natural and traditional products, marketers can adjust their production, promotion, and other marketing activities to better meet consumer expectations for these types of products.

This research is not without limitations. The initially collected sets of articles were considerable, but after carefully excluding articles that were either not related to the studied theme or did not contain a definition, the final sets of articles were not as extensive. Future research could expand the sets of articles examined by expanding the initial research criteria to include additional research areas. In addition, future research should expand the analysis to bring together and delineate other similar, under-defined concepts such as local, homemade, and the like.

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Prirodno tradicionalni ili tradicionalno prirodni – istraživanje koncepata *prirodno* i *tradicionalno* u marketinškim istraživanjima

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Sažetak

Svrha ovog istraživanja je razumjeti kako marketinška istraživanja konceptualiziraju prirodne i tradicionalne proizvode – proizvode koji snažno privlače pozornost potrošača i zauzimaju velike i rastuće tržišne udjele, a nedovoljno su jasni i slabo definirani regulatornim okvirom. Analiza je provedena na sustavno odabranim znanstvenim radovima objavljenim u relevantnim časopisima tijekom posljednja dva desetljeća. Rezultati pokazuju da se prirodni proizvodi uglavnom definiraju načinom proizvodnje i sastojcima koje ne sadrže, dok konsenzus nije postignut za tradicionalne proizvode. Nadalje, ne samo da je pojam tradicionalnog definiran neuobičajeno velikim brojem tema, nego se teme također značajno razlikuju ovisno o skupini dionika koja ih definira što ukazuje na neizbježan komunikacijski problem među tim skupinama. Rezultati također pokazuju da su unatoč pokušajima marketera da povežu značenje ovih dviju vrsta proizvoda, teme u definicijama prirodnih i tradicionalnih proizvoda različite i preklapaju se tek sporadično. Ove spoznaje su korisne kao korak naprijed u kreiranju bolje znanstvene konceptualizacije i specifičnijeg regulatornog okvira za prirodne i tradicionalne proizvode što će smanjiti vjerojatnost obmanjujućih poslovnih praksi i nedoumice među potrošačima i istraživačima.

Ključne riječi: *prirodni proizvodi, tradicionalni proizvodi, sastojci, proizvodnja, podrijetlo*

JEL klasifikacija: *M31, M38*

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