

Australian consumers' concerns for animal welfare: the effect of an animal welfare food rating system on consumer behaviour

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Introduction

Global population growth, rising affluence and increasing consumption of meat, dairy, fish and eggs are forcing the world to face the intersecting challenges of how to feed a population expected to exceed 9 billion by 2050, while controlling the impact of food production on the planet, people and animals (Gerber, 2013; Godfray et al., 2010). To keep up with such demand, animal agriculture in most Western countries have moved away from predominantly small scale and extensive operations, towards intensive systems characterised by confinement. Such intensification has led to many animal welfare concerns, as well as environmental, social, and human health consequences (Gerber, 2013; Steinfeld, 2006).

Research suggests that public values and attitudes towards animals are changing. Such changes are evident in Australia by the increased public concern and emotional engagement regarding the treatment of animals (Bennett & Blaney, 2003; Taylor & Signal, 2009; Vanhonacker & Verbeke, 2013). For example, 71% of Australians agreed that farm animal welfare matters to them when purchasing animal products (Coleman, Hay, & Toukhsati, 2005).

Despite evidence that the public are increasingly concerned about animal welfare in food production, there is a well-documented gap between consumers' attitudes toward animal welfare and their behaviours at the supermarket checkout, known as the attitude-behaviour gap (Carrington, Neville, & Whitwell, 2010; Vermeir & Verbeke, 2006; Young et al., 2010). Some of the reasons for the gap include inconvenience, lack of knowledge and information, and the abundance of confusing claims and labels on food packaging (Aschemann-Witzel & Niebuhr Aagaard, 2014; Bray, Johns, & Kilburn, 2011; Burke, Eckert, & Davis, 2014; Harper & Henson, 2001).

Aim

The aim of the project is to explore Australian consumers attitudes towards farm animal welfare and to investigate the role of animal welfare labels in influencing consumer behaviours with regards to animal-derived products (pork, poultry and eggs).

Progress to Date

Firstly, an extensive literature review was conducted in order to determine previous research in this area. Succeeding this, a face-to-face survey was conducted to investigate Australian consumers' knowledge of and attitudes to farm animal welfare and their reported purchasing of welfare-friendly animal-derived products. The survey was conducted in shopping districts in New South Wales, Australia in 2016 and a total of 135 respondents participated in the study. Overall, the results found that most respondents (92%) were concerned about animal welfare in Australian food production and 87% felt it should be improved. Moreover, 76%, 53%, and 49%, respectively, reported to purchase welfare-friendly eggs, poultry and pork. Respondents were found to associate the impact of farming practices with the quality, healthfulness, taste, safety, and environmental impact of products. However, they reported barriers to purchasing welfare-friendly products such as price and confusion around product labeling. The authors intend to publish the findings of this study and hope that by doing so, they can provide valuable insights into how consumers translate their concerns for animal welfare and their welfare-friendly intentions into actions at the supermarket checkout, in turn helping to drive more welfare-friendly purchase decisions and improving the welfare of animals farmed for food.

The next stage of research, which is currently underway, involves exploring consumers' preferences for higher animal welfare products with independent on-package animal welfare accreditations (such as RSPCA Approving Farming Scheme). In addition, it will test whether providing consumers with details about the animal welfare accreditation, in the form of an animal welfare rating system, could have a positive effect on the attitude-behaviour gap.