

Issue: 18, 2010

An Exploration of Ethical Consumers' Response to 'Animal Friendly' Apparel Labelling

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ABSTRACT

An emerging social ethic for animal welfare that seeks to improve the welfare of animals in industrial farming is evident in the growing demand for products perceived to be 'animal friendly'. Research examining consumer response to 'animal friendly' products has focused on the food product category despite the extensive use of animal fibres, fur, and skins in the production of clothing and textiles. How consumers respond to animal welfare issues in the clothing and textile product category is of particular interest to animal production industries. This paper explores ethical consumers' response to 'animal friendly' labelling of wool apparel. Five focus group interviews were conducted with American female ethical consumers to elicit beliefs and attitudes towards social labels applied to wool apparel that incorporate animal welfare principles. The focus group data indicated that consumers' beliefs about social labels, in terms of perceived credibility, transparency, and relevance of the label to the product, influence their attitude towards the label and subsequent purchase intentions. Further, it appeared that consumer beliefs about the ethical issue(s) articulated by social labels influence consumer attitudes and purchase intentions.

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Introduction

Over the past forty years, society has grown increasingly concerned about the treatment of farm animals due to changing demographics, a questioning of accepted human traditions, changes in the nature of animal use, and changes in agricultural production practices. Hence there have been calls for tougher animal welfare legislation and the proliferation of new laws across the Western world limiting what people can do to animals (Rollin 2006). In the European Union, for example, legislation requires larger cages for laying hens from 2012 and prohibits the use of sow gestation stalls from 2013. In Australia, the Tasmanian government announced the phasing out of the use of sow stalls from 2010, with a total ban on their use coming in to force in 2017.¹

Changes in the social ethic for animal welfare are also reflected in consumer activism, including an increase in demand for products perceived to be more 'animal friendly'. For example, studies have found that consumers were willing to purchase eggs produced with animal-friendly management practices (Bennett 1997; Rolfe 1999). Such research identified consumers' concerns about the welfare of caged layer hens, which has, in turn, influenced legislators to increase cage sizes in the European Union. However, most studies

¹ www.dpiw.tas.gov.au/inter.nsf/

investigating consumer response to animal welfare and 'animal friendly' products have focused on food items, despite the extensive use of animal fibres,² fur, and skins in the production of clothing and textiles.

How consumers respond to animal welfare issues in the clothing and textile product categories is of particular interest to animal production industries, such as the Australian wool industry, which has been the target of anti-cruelty activism and retail boycotts. Wool is an important apparel fibre that generates retail sales of approximately US\$75 billion a year for the clothing and textile industry (Millward Brown Pty Ltd 2007). Wool has the largest share of the animal fibre market and Australia is the largest supplier of apparel wool, producing 46% of wool fibre used in clothing production in 2004. The Australian wool industry has been the target of a highly publicised anti-cruelty campaign. In 2004, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) launched an international retail and consumer campaign ('Save the Sheep'³) against the Australian sheep industry, calling for an end to the live export of sheep from Australia and to the 'barbaric' practice of mulesing lambs. Mulesing⁴ is a 'one-off' surgical procedure performed on-farm to remove wool-bearing skin from the breech area of lambs in order to prevent flystrike⁵. Mulesing has traditionally been performed on sheep in Australia without anaesthetic or analgesics. Although flystrike is a problem in all sheep-producing countries, the risk of flystrike is particularly high in Australia due to susceptible breeds of sheep and climatic conditions.

Despite an ongoing battle with PETA over the practice of mulesing and the live sheep trade, the Australian wool industry has investigated opportunities to market wool as an 'ethical' natural apparel fibre. In 2006, the industry research and development organisation (Australian Wool Innovation (AWI) Ltd) commissioned a report on customer requirements for 'ethical wool' which urged the industry to develop niche businesses around the positive environmental image of wool (The Woolmark Company 2006). Further, the report suggested the wool industry needed to communicate the ethical attributes of wool through appropriate social labelling as such attributes are unobservable to consumers.

Since the 1990s, consumers whose purchase decisions are influenced by their social, environmental, and ethical concerns have become increasingly evident across a range of product and service categories. Consumers acting on their ethical concerns can force changes in production and marketing activities through their purchasing behaviour. The extent and potential influence of ethical consumerism has largely been inferred from opinion polls. However, there appears to be a discrepancy between positive intentions towards ethical consumer behaviour reported in such polls and actual consumer behaviour. This gap between intentions and behaviour has been observed in the apparel industry as retailers have found it difficult to sell ethical products such as organic or recycled garments (Ortega 1994). Researchers have attributed the gap between consumers' reported intentions and actual behaviour to several factors, including social desirability bias, higher prices associated with more ethically sound products, and consumer confusion over product claims. This suggests the importance of exploring consumer response to information provided about the social and ethical attributes of such products. The present study explored ethical consumers'

² The main animal fibres used in clothing production are wool, cashmere, angora, mohair, and silk (www.naturalfibres2009.org).

³ www.savethesheep.com

⁴ Mulesing is the surgical removal of wool-bearing skin, on lambs aged from 2 to 12 weeks, from either side of the breech and around the tail using curved or straight edged sheers. The scarring that occurs as a result of mulesing flattens the skin around the breech and tail stump and reduces the build up of secretions that attract flies.

⁵ Flystrike occurs when flies lay their eggs in soiled areas of wool on the sheep. The larvae burrow into the skin, impeding animal growth, damaging wool, and causing septicaemia, which can lead to the death of the sheep host. In Australia, the main species responsible for flystrike in sheep is the blowfly *Lucilia cuprina*.

responses to animal-friendly labelling of wool apparel, with a specific focus on their beliefs and attitudes towards such labels.

Method

As prior research has not examined ethical consumers' beliefs and attitudes towards animal-friendly labelling of wool apparel, focus groups were an appropriate exploratory approach. Five focus groups were undertaken in the United States with 47 female ethical consumers as, although Australia is the largest single supplier of wool apparel fibre, the domestic market for wool apparel is relatively small. Conversely, the US is a major, established market for apparel made with Australian wool and has been the main target for PETA's 'Save the Sheep' campaign. Recipients of an email invitation posted on a University website who responded positively to the screening question, 'are you someone who often considers the social, ethical and environmental attributes of products when making purchase decisions?' were invited to participate in the focus groups. Participants were aged from 20 to 66 years, with a median age of 32 years. A quarter of the participants had an average family income of \$24,999 and about a third (37%) had an income of \$100,000 or more per annum. The majority (89%) of participants had a Bachelors Degree or higher. Participants had shopped for apparel 20 times, on average, in the last 12 months and six times for wool apparel.

Participants were presented with identical wool garments with two competing animal-friendly brands displayed on garment swing tags and asked to describe the brands and share their beliefs and attitudes towards them. The following animal friendly brands were used in the study:

- 1) Certified Humane (CH)⁶ – Independent certification label for animal products sold in the USA meeting the Humane Farm Animal Care program standards (i.e., nutritious diet without antibiotics or hormones, animals raised with shelter, resting areas, sufficient space, and the ability to engage in natural behaviours).
- 2) Zque⁷ – New Zealand wool fibre accreditation scheme used by wool apparel brands such as SmartWool, assuring environmental, social and economic sustainability, animal welfare (non- mulesed), and traceability back to the source (i.e., sheep farm).

Findings

Because of the exploratory nature of the study, it is not possible to generalise freely from the focus group findings. However, the analysis of the focus group discussions revealed beliefs and attitudes that may apply more broadly to consumers' responses to social labelling. The conceptual model of ethical consumers' response to social labelling presented in Figure 1 reflects the main themes and sub-themes that emerged from the discussions. The model reflects the influence of beliefs and attitudes towards the social label and the focal ethical issue(s) articulated by the label on purchase intentions.

The model examines consumer' beliefs about a label in terms of perceived credibility, transparency of the accreditation or certification process, relevance of the label to the product, attitude towards the label, and purchase intentions. Further, it is proposed that consumers' beliefs about the ethical issue(s) articulated on the social label and their attitudes towards the label and ethical issue influence their purchase intentions.

⁶ For further details see www.certifiedhumane.org/

⁷ For further details see www.zque.co.nz/

Consumer beliefs and attitudes towards social labels

None of the participants were aware of the Zque or CH labels prior to the discussion, implying their beliefs and attitudes reflected their response to the information provided on the labels rather than pre-formed attitudes relating to these accreditation systems. Focus group participants were evenly divided in their positive and negative attitudes towards label information and certification.

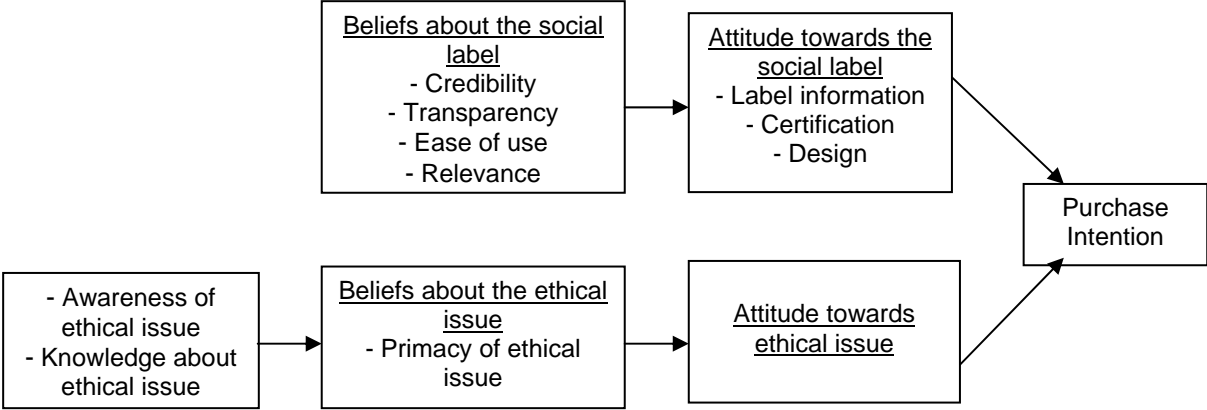


Figure 1: A conceptual model of ethical consumers’ response to social labelling

Beliefs about the credibility and transparency of the products ethical attributes and accreditation influenced whether participants held positive or negative attitudes towards label information and certification. Some participants expressed positive beliefs about the credibility, transparency, and ease of use of information provided on the Zque and CH labels (e.g., “I liked [CH] the best because it had the most detail on it...I trusted it the most” and “I found that I believed this one [Zque]”). These participants also expressed positive attitudes towards product certification, information, and design and positive intentions towards the purchase of wool apparel with these social labels. In contrast, other participants expressed negative beliefs about the labels, seeing them as difficult to use, opaque, and not credible because of the amount of information provided (e.g., “It’s just crowding out, I’m looking for simple, you don’t look and read so much”, “the Zque one, it says accredited but it doesn’t say by whom”, and “There is a lot of obfuscation here, people are deliberately trying to confound you”). These participants also expressed negative attitudes towards label certification, information, and design and negative purchase intentions towards products with these social labels.

Consumer beliefs and attitudes towards ethical issues

Participants’ awareness and knowledge of the focal ethical issue(s) addressed on the label and their perception of its primacy appeared to influence their attitude towards products embodying these ethical issues. Most participants expressed positive attitudes towards the broad range of ethical issues addressed by the Zque label (e.g., “I like this one that covers it all, environmental, social, and economic” and “[Zque] is more sustainable, environmental, social, and economic, its sustainability rather than just organic”). The ethical issues addressed on the Zque label were numerous and broad enough for all participants to hold positive beliefs about the primacy of at least one issue (e.g., “You can trace it back to the sheep...that would be way cool”). However, none of the participants were aware of mulesing or understanding what ‘non-mulesed’ meant (e.g., “I don’t know what this word [non-mulesed] means”). Participants who expressed positive beliefs about the primacy of environmental, social, and economic sustainability also expressed positive attitudes toward

the ethical issue and intentions towards the purchase of Zque-labelled wool apparel (e.g., “If they were the same price I would still buy the Zque one”).

The CH label evoked positive beliefs about the welfare of animals farmed under this certification (e.g., “It means the animals have been treated well, they’re all running around having happy lives”). Those participants who expressed positive beliefs about the primacy of animal welfare and positive attitudes towards this ethical issue also expressed positive purchase intentions towards CH-labelled wool apparel (e.g., “I liked [CH] the best, I love animals. I would actually pay more for animal rights”). Whereas, participants who expressed negative beliefs about the primacy of animal welfare over human welfare (e.g., “If you’re going to say something is certified humane, then it should be completely humane, not just the animal” and “It says animal welfare but it doesn’t say people welfare”) expressed negative purchase intentions towards CH labelled wool apparel.

The study’s findings have important implications for the wool industry and wool apparel manufacturers and retailers. Despite stated concerns about the welfare of animals used in the production of wool apparel and a desire for informative social labelling for wool apparel, participants’ responses to the Zque and CH labels suggested intentions to purchase wool apparel with social labels are complex. Judging from the positive responses relating to the broad range of social, ethical, and environmental attributes described on the Zque label and the negative responses towards the limited scope of the CH label, people want a broad range of ethical issues to be addressed on wool apparel social labels.

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