Consumer decision-making for animal-friendly products: synthesis and implications

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Abstract

Understanding how consumers’ concerns affect the consumer decision-making process is important for developing a market for animal-friendly products. This paper presents a synthesis of research on the role of animal welfare in consumer decision-making. Drawing on basic models and concepts from consumer behaviour literature, we present the findings along the lines of five phases of the consumer decision-making process: (i) need recognition; (ii) information search; (iii) information evaluation; (iv) purchase decision; and (v) post-purchase evaluation. Consumer decision-making about animal-based food products is routine, situational and sometimes irrational, instead of based on complete information. Consumers associate animal welfare with a higher quality perception and labels and high prices further increase the perception of quality. The findings have implications for stakeholders that aim to develop a market for animal-friendly products, like (coalitions of) governments, animal interest groups, retailers and brand manufacturers.

Keywords: animal-friendly brands, animal-friendly products, animal welfare, consumer concerns, consumer decision-making, marketing

Introduction

In the current international economic and political environment, improvements to the welfare of farm animals result often from market initiatives (eg Freedom Foods, Marks & Spencer’s Farm Assurance Scheme, Neuland, Carnesi, and Globalgap). At the same time, research on animal welfare has made vast progress in understanding its role in markets for animal-based products, such as meat, eggs and dairy (Kjærnes & Havik 2009; Roe & Murdoch 2009). Because the final purchase decision about food products is in the hands of consumers, research typically has surveyed consumers about their opinions of a range of issues related to animal welfare (Bennett 1997; Bennett & Yee 2004; Frewer et al 2005; Kjærnes & Havik 2009).

These studies indicate that European consumers share concerns about animal welfare. The most recent survey by the European Union (European Commission 2007) reveals that 77% of consumers believe in the need for further improvements in the welfare of farmed animals. According to nationally representative samples of consumers in the United Kingdom, Ireland, France, Germany and Italy (n = 500 in each country), an average of 66% admit to buying fewer animal products because of the way in which the animals have been kept (Harper & Henson 2001). The Welfare Quality® project, supported by the EU within the 6th framework programme, offers additional insight into how consumers feel about animal welfare; in all the EU countries studied in this project (ie France: Poulain 2004; United Kingdom: Bennett & Yee 2004; Italy: Miele et al 2004; The Netherlands: Velde et al 2002; Norway: Kjørstad & Havik 2009; Sweden: Pettersson 2004), animal welfare is subject to ongoing social debate. Findings from other projects and studies in Belgium (Verbeke & Viaene 2000), France (Ouédraogo 2003), Denmark, Sweden (Scholderer 2003), Germany (Rathenau Institute 2003) and the United Kingdom (Bennett 1997; Bennett et al 2002; McEachern & Schroeder 2002; Ouédraogo 2003) confirm these results, offering ample evidence of public concern about animal welfare in Europe.

Despite this research attention in the monitoring of consumers’ opinions, less is known about how consumers actually integrate animal welfare concerns into their purchase decisions. Many studies focus on one or more specific elements of consumer decision-making, such as trade-offs between higher levels of animal welfare and price (Bennett et al 2002; Burrell & Vrieze 2003), and the role of animal welfare labels in decision-making (Mayfield et al 2007). As a consequence, a somewhat fragmented picture has emerged of the role of animal welfare in consumer decision-making.

The aim of this paper is to synthesise the available evidence on the role of animal welfare in consumer decision-making.