

Eating for change: How media use and social justice impact consumer perceptions of ethical labels

As ethical labels accumulate within the food marketplace, researchers are beginning to investigate how consumers use, understand, and respond to these labels in the grocery aisle and what impact that has on the food industry. Ethical consumption of products, or “eating for change,” follows a neo-liberal logic in which one identifies with particular environmental, ecological, animal welfare, and/or fair labor causes through their purchase of certain products over others. While animal and human rights groups have been campaigning for fair trade production and ethics in agriculture for years, this new-found consumer demand for social justice in agriculture is having a multi-billion-dollar impact on the industry. The USDA estimates that it will take about \$5.6 billion to convert to a majority cage-free system, while companies like McDonalds, Aramark, Walmart, and Costco are driving the changes in industry standards.

Other studies have focused on regulatory laws, overlooking how media may play a part in consumer’s interpretation or understanding of ethical labels. This study aims to fill that gap by examining consumer beliefs regarding labels on ethically produced food. The purpose of this study is to examine how people define their relationship to labels, and what impact media use has in the process of evaluating labels. Very little work has investigated labels of “cage free” or “certified humane” on consumer attitudes and purchase intent for eggs. Still fewer studies have examined cross-product attitudes (such as eggs and coffee). This study seeks to fill this gap by examining consumer attitudes and purchase intent across a variety of different ethical/eco labels common in the marketplace.

Using qualitative and quantitative insights generated from a Qualtrics survey panel consisting of 418 respondents, the findings from this study highlight important trends in consumer understanding and use of labels, and raises critical questions for food labeling and advertising ethics. In both the quantitative rankings of labels and the qualitative responses about purchasing decisions, consumers reported that the most ethically-sourced products were not necessarily the ones they would buy. While 24.4% of respondents described labels as informative, 34.5% described labels as being corrupt or confusing. This finding echoes previous studies which have found that consumers interpret ethical labels (such as cage free or organic) to mean significantly more than the regulation requires. Respondents also demonstrated that when given a choice, they care more about the ethical treatment of animals (cage free) than people (fair trade). Examining these responses through the theoretical lens of Belief in a Just World, this study also finds that, in general, respondents believe that the world is a fair place and that people get what they deserve. Analyzing this belief in justness with opinions regarding ethical food labels and media use, this study also found significant correlations between a consumer’s belief in a just world and both media use (.23) and purchase intent (.33). Findings also indicate that a consumer’s belief in a just world is a mediating factor for the relationship between their media use and their purchase intent for ethically sourced products.