

## Are consumers wilfully ignorant about animal welfare?

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### Abstract

*Wilful ignorance is a documented human behaviour whereby people deliberately avoid information. Although much work has documented consumer attitudes toward farm animal welfare, few studies have questioned whether people even want to know how farm animals are raised. Using an internet survey of 1,000 subjects from the US state of Oklahoma, it is shown that around one-third admit to being wilfully ignorant regarding pork production. One-third also chose to look at a blank screen rather than a picture of how pregnant hogs are housed. Avoidance of guilt is shown to be a motivator for this behaviour.*

**Keywords:** animal welfare, consumer attitudes, consumer preferences, gestation crate, swine production, wilful ignorance

### Are consumers wilfully ignorant about animal welfare?

Much academic work has focused on studying consumer preferences for animal welfare, including the sources people use for information (McKendree *et al* 2014) — but one question typically neglected is whether a consumer even wants information. That is, what if some consumers would rather not know how farm animals are raised? Onwezen and van der Weele's 2016 study in The Netherlands found that about 27% confess to ignoring specific information regarding meat production but, paradoxically, are also concerned with human responsibility.

Such behaviour is referred to as strategic or wilful ignorance, and without a keen understanding of its prevalence and nature a complete understanding of food preferences is impossible. Empirical research has demonstrated that consumers will often deliberately ignore information on negative externalities (such as environmental pollution) when choosing plane tickets (Thunström *et al* 2014). Individuals at risk of Huntington's disease or HIV sometimes refuse to be tested even though it is both free and accurate (Bénabou & Tirole 2016). This empirical finding can be explained using economic modelling that combines the concept of multiple selves and guilt-avoidance (Thunström *et al* 2016), and models where information enters an individual's utility function directly (Golman *et al* 2017). The appeal of wilful ignorance was also evidenced on *The Late Show* with Stephen Colbert when the host remarked, "Sometimes I wish there was an iPhone app that

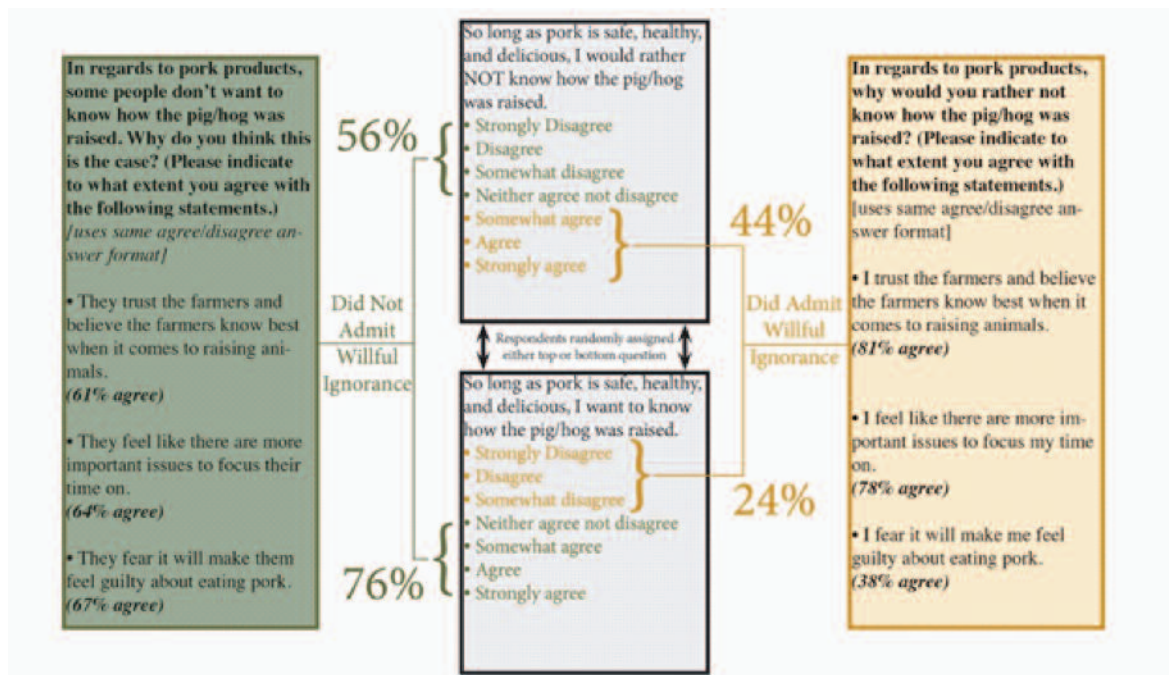
would help me forget where my iPhone was made" to much laughter. Do some individuals feel the same way about meat, dairy, and eggs?

It is a common notion that 'ignorance is bliss' in many aspects of life, including food. When a cattle industry representative was interviewed about a state-level initiative involving agriculture in Oklahoma, he told the reporter that, "Most of us *choose* [italics added] not to think about what went into making those two all-beef patties on a McDonald's Big Mac". How many people in the state of Oklahoma really exhibit wilful ignorance in regards to livestock and agriculture? This short communication reports the results of a survey of over 1,000 Oklahomans answering that very question. It provides a simpler and more direct methodology, and a different population, than that used by Onwezen and van der Weele (2016), but arrives at the same conclusion that roughly one-third of individuals exhibit wilful ignorance in regards to meat consumption. It also explores other explanations for wilful ignorance than just guilt-avoidance.

### Objectives and survey

An internet survey of 1,000 Oklahomans was conducted in June 2016, where expressions of wilful ignorance were measured using the topic of pork production. The sample was purchased from Qualtrics and although the sample demographics differed from that of Oklahoma, as a whole, in a number of dimensions, correcting for this using sample balancing had only minuscule impacts on the results. Respondents were first asked whether or not

Figure 1



Expressions of wilful ignorance among 1,000 Oklahomans in an internet survey.

they wanted information on how swine are raised to see if they would admit feelings of wilful ignorance. Then they were given a choice between acquiring information or watching a blank screen to see if they would decline information even when costless.

### Confessing wilful ignorance

Measuring actual wilful ignorance is difficult because some of it may occur more as a passive strategy than a salient choice, and thus may be difficult for people to truly recognise. Even when it is an acknowledged, deliberate choice people may be reticent to admit it. Simply asking people whether they exhibit wilful ignorance should provide a lower-bound estimate of the extent to which it occurs, so wilful ignorance is first measured by asking individuals one of the two questions in the middle portion of Figure 1. The results show that, depending on how the question is framed, 24–44% of respondents admitted they did not want to know how swine were raised (the difference might be attributable to affirmation bias, where individuals prefer to agree rather than disagree with statements). This suggests that roughly one-third of Oklahomans preferred not to be involved in the swine welfare debate, and to not have to think about it when purchasing food and voting on farm-related initiatives.

Next the survey asked why respondents chose wilful ignorance, giving them three choices with which to agree or disagree. A large majority of respondents said they chose wilful ignorance because they trust farmers and/or have more important issues to tend to (after all, cognitive limitations prevent us from understanding all issues). Only about one-third said they feared knowing how animals were raised would make them feel guilty about the food they purchase.

Individuals who did not express wilful ignorance, and indicated they did want to know how swine were raised, were asked to speculate on why some people did not want to know. As before, a majority of individuals said it was because people trusted the farmers and had more important issues to consider, but an even larger majority said it was because the people who chose ignorance did so to avoid guilt.

When describing motivations for one's own wilful ignorance, guilt avoidance seems to play a minor role. However, it becomes a major role when describing the motivations for others. This is probably due to individuals demonstrating social desirability bias when describing themselves, whereby they avoid making statements that would be deemed undesirable by others. Such behaviour has been documented regarding farm animal welfare as well as for other topics, and tends to exist when describing oneself but not others. In some cases an individual's actual behaviour is better predicted by asking how other people behave, as opposed to how they themselves behave (Epley & Dunning 2000; Chang *et al* 2009). This suggests that guilt-avoidance is probably a motivator for between one- and two-thirds of individuals avoiding information on how livestock are raised.

### Deliberately choosing ignorance

Another way to measure wilful ignorance is to give respondents the choice of remaining ignorant as to how swine are raised. Many respondents may not know how pregnant sows are housed, and since they are already taking a survey, electing to see such a picture could provide them with information useful for making food-purchasing decisions. This choice was given to respondents using the question in

Figure 2



Choosing wilful ignorance among 1,000 Oklahomans in an internet survey.

Figure 2, where they were given the choice of seeing: (i) how pregnant sows are housed on a typical farm; or (ii) a blank page. Choosing the blank page is deliberately deciding to remain ignorant regarding the housing of pregnant sows. Since the person would otherwise see a blank page skipping the picture does not allow them to finish the survey earlier. Moreover, the respondents would have to watch the blank page for a certain period of time: however long they wanted for one-third of the respondents, 10 s for the second-third, and 20 for the final third.

Regardless of how long the blank page would be shown if chosen, about one-third of the respondents chose the blank page, deciding upon wilful ignorance. The question assumes that a picture is more appealing than a blank page to most, an assumption driven by the ubiquity of images in human culture, from cave drawings by our ancestors to corporate logos. Under this assumption a person would only choose a blank page if the picture is expected to generate negative feelings, and so roughly one-third of individuals probably expected the picture to show a pig being treated poorly and decided they did not want that exposure.

### Do people care about farm animal welfare?

Surveys that ask people if they care about the well-being of farm animals find that most people answer in the affirmative (Eurobarometer 2005; Lusk & Norwood 2010; McKendree *et al* 2014). Likewise, when asked to vote on measures to ban livestock cages, voters typically pass the ban (Smithson *et al* 2014). Yet sales of cage-free eggs remain small compared to eggs produced in battery cage systems, and

products sold under labels like Animal Welfare Approved are absent from most Oklahoma grocery stores.

This discrepancy may be partially explained by the concept of wilful ignorance — but only partially, as this is a complex subject, likely to have multiple causes. Animal welfare is more difficult to be kept out of mind when asked about it directly on a survey or in the voting booth, but in the store it is easy to dismiss. When given the choice, at least one-third of the Oklahomans surveyed would rather not have to confront the animal welfare issue. This is because they trust the farmer and have other issues to worry about, but is also a strategy of avoiding guilt.

### Animal welfare implications

The level of animal welfare provided to livestock is directly determined by farm management practices, but those practices are influenced by consumer attitudes, as expressed in the grocery store, the voting booth, and societal culture. How does the presence of wilful ignorance by consumers impact animal welfare? On the one hand, this survey shows that some consumers avoid the issue to prevent feelings of guilt, and the less responsibility consumers accept for their food choices the lower the animal welfare. On the other hand, this survey shows that many consumers also trust farmers, and if consumers are relatively uninformed about the relationship between farm management practices and animal well-being, allowing farmers discretion in how livestock are raised may be best for the animals. Only further research can discern whether greater wilful ignorance benefits or harms livestock. The present research shows that the question is worth exploring.



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