

Consumers misunderstand 'cruelty-free' labeled products, researchers find

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Based on a recent study, University of Missouri and Oregon researchers believe a legal definition for what constitutes "cruelty-free" labeled products should be determined and manufacturers should be required to abide by the legal use of the label. Many consumers intentionally buy products manufactured in ways that do not exploit child labor or cause minimal harm to animals or the environment. Many businesses, such as shampoo, cosmetic, fragrance and pharmaceutical companies, use the term cruelty-free to attract buyers, giving consumers the impression that no animal testing was used while manufacturing and testing the products. However, that is not always the case.

"Because there is no legal standard for what is and isn't cruelty-free, consumers are vulnerable to deceptive advertising," said Joonghwa Lee, a [doctoral candidate](#) at the University of Missouri School of Journalism. "A company may claim their product is cruelty-free, but there still may be some [animal testing](#) done somewhere along the [manufacturing process](#). This could lead to consumers being tricked into buying [products](#) that they do not support."

During the study, Lee and lead author Kim Sheehan, a professor in the University of Oregon School of Journalism and Communication, conducted an [online survey](#) asking participants about their knowledge of cruelty-free labeled products. The participants were then given information from a New York Times article describing the ambiguous nature of cruelty-free labeled products.

"Participants in our study who recognized the term cruelty-free indicated that they would be more likely to buy products that were cruelty-free and they had much more [positive attitudes](#) toward brands that advertised themselves as cruelty-free," Lee said. "However, once the participants learned the wide range of definitions that exist for cruelty-free products, they found using the cruelty-free designation to be less socially responsible and less safe than they did before learning that information."

Sheehan and Lee say their findings are concerning in regard to consumer protection. They say that because they have shown that consumers are willing to spend money on products that are cruelty-free, even if they don't understand that those products aren't always completely free of animal testing, the door is opened for product unethical business and advertising practices. Sheehan and Lee believe there should be a legal definition for what constitutes a cruelty-free product to help protect consumers.

"Our study shows that consumers rely on their own personal moral values to make decisions," Sheehan said. "If the product information consumers receive is misleading, then they are not able to make important decisions in ways that they would consider morally correct. Creating a legal standard to define terms like cruelty-free will aid consumers in making the best decisions for themselves and their families."

More information: This study was presented at the American Academy of Advertising 2012 Annual Conference.

Provided by University of Missouri-Columbia

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