



# Raising Awareness of Welfarewashing Shapes Public Perception of the RSPCA Assured Scheme Research Report

Rob Udale  
Natalie Braine

in collaboration with



Animal  
Think Tank

Gen V

October 2025

This study tested six London Underground adverts designed to expose welfare washing and challenge trust in animal welfare labels like RSPCA Assured. A single exposure significantly shifted public belief, showing strong potential for reframing public understanding. The findings offer practical insights for campaigners, creatives and strategists on how to communicate about misleading welfare claims in ways that prompt reflection, build trust, and invite action.

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# Executive Summary

This research, commissioned by [Gen V](#), tested the effectiveness of six different framings of a London Underground ad intended to raise public awareness about welfarewashing — the misleading marketing of 'animal products' as higher welfare than they truly are. The study particularly focused on public perceptions of the RSPCA Assured scheme, which has faced scrutiny for failing to guarantee the wellbeing of farmed animals.

A nationally representative sample of 600 UK participants was recruited. Participants were first surveyed on their familiarity with welfare-related terms and their agreement with three statements about the RSPCA Assured scheme. After viewing one of six ad concepts, participants rated their agreement again with the same statements and additional measures relating to the clarity, trustworthiness and impact of the adverts.

## Key Findings

**1) There is significant potential for raising public awareness of welfarewashing** and opening up a broader conversation about the credibility of animal welfare claims. Before the study, only 5% of participants were familiar with the term 'welfarewashing', compared to 59% who recognised the concept of 'greenwashing'.

**2) There is significant potential for shifting attitudes about welfarewashing.** Exposure to a single image from the campaign had a striking impact: belief that the RSPCA Assured label guarantees the wellbeing of farmed animals dropped from nearly 70% to just over 40% (41.1%), and support for ending the scheme tripled (from 5.5% to 16.7%). This points to the power of even minimal interventions in shifting public perceptions.

**3) Messages that invite reflection and encourage people to draw their own conclusions have potential to be more persuasive** than those that instruct or dictate beliefs. When possible, connecting with and building on existing mental models helps make messages clearer and more relatable.

**4) Rigorous message-testing is essential to identify the most effective ways to communicate and build public support.** By refining messages based on evidence, advocates can deepen understanding and foster stronger engagement with the cause.

**5) Leveraging familiar symbols and existing mental models can greatly enhance message impact.** In this study, the RSPCA logo helped viewers quickly understand and connect with the message by drawing on their prior knowledge and associations. Similarly, advocates might consider using other trusted symbols or references to make messages more accessible and meaningful.

# Introduction

The RSPCA Assured scheme, originally launched as Freedom Food in 1994, has been in operation for 30 years. Over the past 17 years, it has been the focus of increased scrutiny. Nearly 100 undercover investigations conducted by animal protection organisations have documented concerning conditions on RSPCA Assured farms and in associated slaughterhouses. These investigations have raised questions about the scheme's ability to consistently uphold its stated animal welfare standards.

In 2024, 38 farms certified under the RSPCA Assured scheme were the subject of investigations that documented conditions inconsistent with the scheme's stated welfare standards. Despite public concern and calls from advocacy groups to review or end the scheme, the RSPCA has continued its support for the programme.

Welfarewashing refers to the marketing of products as more 'ethical' than they are in practice, often through certifications such as the RSPCA Assured label. Many consumers may be unaware of this dynamic and may unintentionally support practices that do not align with their ethical expectations.

This research was commissioned by Gen V to pilot test several London Underground advertisement designs intended to raise awareness about welfarewashing ([welfarewashing.org](https://welfarewashing.org)). The aim of the study was to evaluate the effectiveness of these designs in shaping public opinion and to inform Gen V's decision on which version to display. The advertisements focused on highlighting the potentially misleading nature of certification schemes, such as RSPCA Assured, and engaging the public on the issue of welfarewashing.

Participants in this study were shown one of six advertisement concepts, each varying in headline, tagline, and whether the RSPCA logo was included. After viewing the ad, participants rated their agreement with key statements relating to the RSPCA Assured label, welfarewashing, and associated issues. The study aimed to identify which messaging strategies most effectively raise awareness of welfarewashing, whether the presence of the RSPCA logo influences perceptions of the Assured label, and how different ad designs affect attitudes towards the label and the likelihood of sharing or discussing the content.

# Method

A representative (in terms of age, sex, and ethnicity) sample of 600 UK participants was recruited through Prolific. They were first asked to indicate whether they had previously heard of any of the following welfarewashing related terms:

1. Welfarewashing.
2. Humanewashing<sup>1</sup>
3. Greenwashing.
4. RSPCA Assured label.
5. Red Tractor certified standards.

They were then asked to rate their agreement with three statements about the RSPCA Assured scheme (on a 1-7 Likert scale from "Strongly disagree" to "Strongly agree"):

1. "The RSPCA Assured label ensures the wellbeing of farmed animals."
2. "The RSPCA Assured label misleads the public by hiding animal cruelty."
3. "If the RSPCA Assured scheme doesn't ensure the wellbeing of farmed animals, then it needs to be dropped."

Next, participants were shown one of six different ad concepts. These ads were selected to cover a range of headline and tagline combinations, as well as to vary the presence or absence of the RSPCA logo. The six concepts tested were as follows (full images of each design can be found in the Appendix):

1. Concept 1: "Don't trust the label + Love animals?" with the RSPCA logo
2. Concept 2: "Don't trust the label + Love animals?" without the RSPCA logo
3. Concept 3: "Don't trust the label + My name is Charlie" without the RSPCA logo
4. Concept 4: "Don't trust the label + My name is Charlie" with the RSPCA logo
5. Concept 5: "High welfare is a lie + Love animals?" without the RSPCA logo
6. Concept 6: "High welfare is a lie + They say nightmare" without the RSPCA logo

After viewing the ads, participants rated their agreement with a series of statements, including the three statements they rated before seeing the ad:

1. The message in this ad is clear.
2. I agree with the message in this ad.
3. I am curious to go to the website in this ad.
4. I am likely to talk to someone else about this ad.

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<sup>1</sup> The term humane is still widely used within the animal protection movement, often in relation to so-called 'ethical' labels. Although we consider the term to be problematic - framing compassion as uniquely human and excluding our fellow animals as capable of compassion - we included it in this study to explore public familiarity with it and the ideas it evokes.



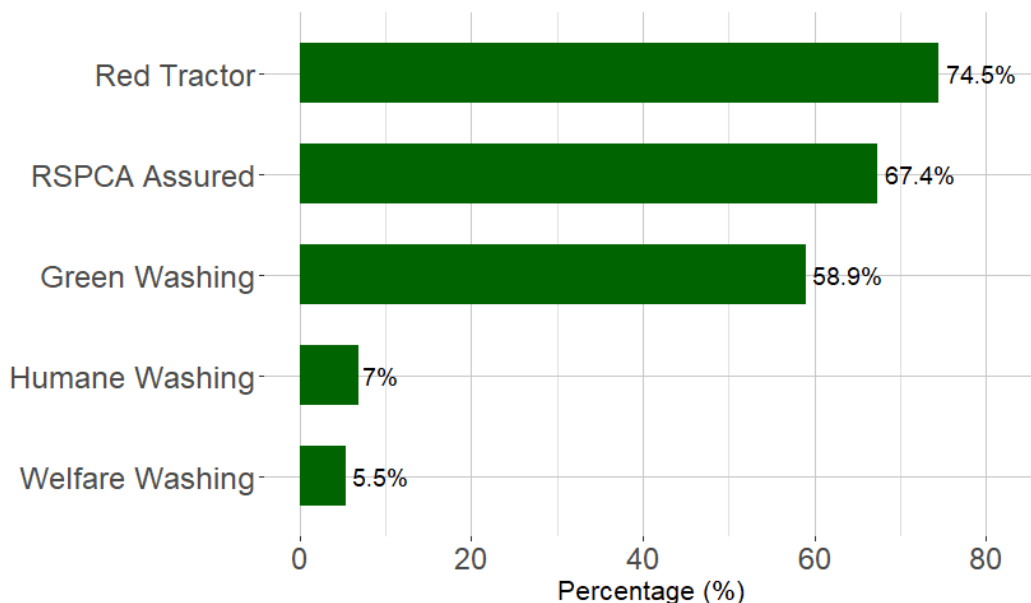
5. The ad is manipulative.
6. I don't trust the ad.
7. I understand what welfarewashing is.
8. Welfarewashing is a serious issue.
9. The RSPCA Assured label ensures the wellbeing of farmed animals.
10. The RSPCA Assured label misleads the public by hiding animal cruelty.
11. If the RSPCA Assured scheme doesn't ensure the wellbeing of farmed animals, then it needs to be dropped.

We also asked about their agreement with statements regarding the abolition of farming animals:

1. Humans should have the right to use animals for food, clothing and other purposes.
2. Animals should not be used for food, regardless of how well they are treated.
3. It would be better if society did eventually stop using animals for human benefit (e.g. food, entertainment, clothing).
4. I would support a law that protected the rights of all animals in not being harmed, exploited or killed - even if it would mean that humans could no longer use animals for their meat, milk, eggs, or other body parts.

## Results

The concept of greenwashing is already widely recognised, with 58.9% of people familiar with the term. In contrast, welfarewashing (5.5%) and humanewashing (7.0%) are far less well understood. Given that public awareness of humanewashing and welfarewashing is similarly low, there is strong potential for growth.



**Figure 1.** The percentage of respondents who responded 'yes' to the question of whether they had heard of Red Tractor or RSPCA Assured schemes, as well as

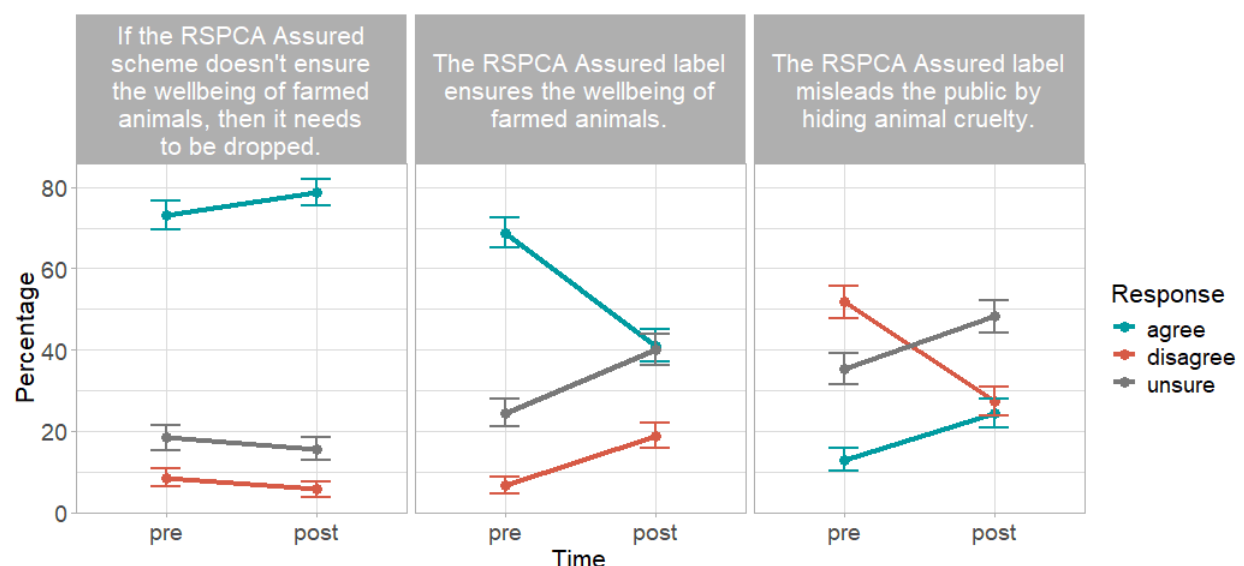
*greenwashing, humanewashing, or welfarewashing.*

The first analysis explored how much people's attitudes changed after seeing the ad, compared to before, regardless of which version they saw. Before viewing the ad, there was already strong agreement with the statement: "If the RSPCA Assured scheme doesn't ensure the wellbeing of farmed animals, then it needs to be dropped," with 73.1% agreeing. After seeing the ad, agreement rose slightly to 78.6%.

In hindsight, the phrasing of this question could be improved. It measures conditional agreement: that the scheme should be dropped if it fails to ensure wellbeing. It does not directly measure belief about whether it should be dropped because the scheme *currently does not* ensure wellbeing.

The next statement offers more direct insight. Before seeing the ad, 68.8% agreed with the statement: "The RSPCA Assured label ensures the wellbeing of farmed animals." After seeing the ad, this dropped sharply to 41.1%. Taken together, these two questions allow us to infer how many people came to believe that the scheme fails to ensure animal wellbeing and should therefore be dropped. Before the ad, only 5.5% of the sample both disagreed that the label ensures wellbeing and agreed that the scheme should be dropped if it does not ensure wellbeing. This rose to 16.7% after seeing the ad.

Finally, agreement with the statement: "The RSPCA Assured label misleads the public by hiding animal cruelty" increased from 13% before the ad to 24.4% after the ad.



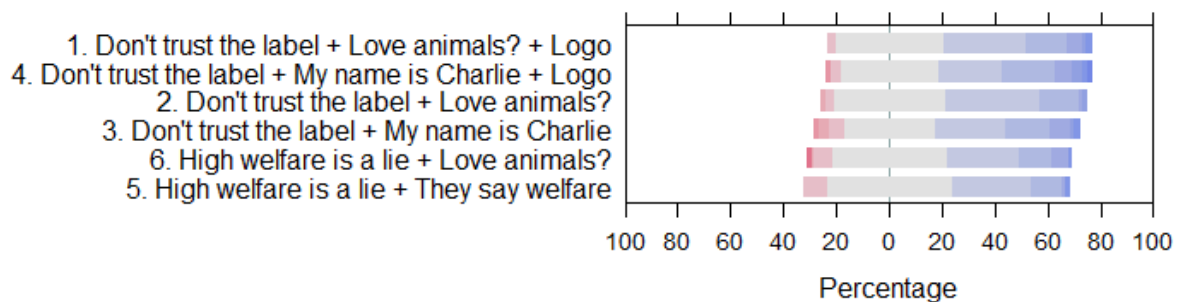
**Figure 2.** Percentage of participants who agreed (at least 'somewhat agreed'), disagreed (at least 'somewhat disagreed') or were unsure ('Neither agree nor disagree') with each statement about the RSPCA Assured scheme, before and after seeing the ad.

Next, we analysed changes in attitudes towards the RSPCA Assured scheme after seeing the ad, broken down by which version of the ad participants viewed. We measured the pre- to post-ad difference in agreement with the three statements

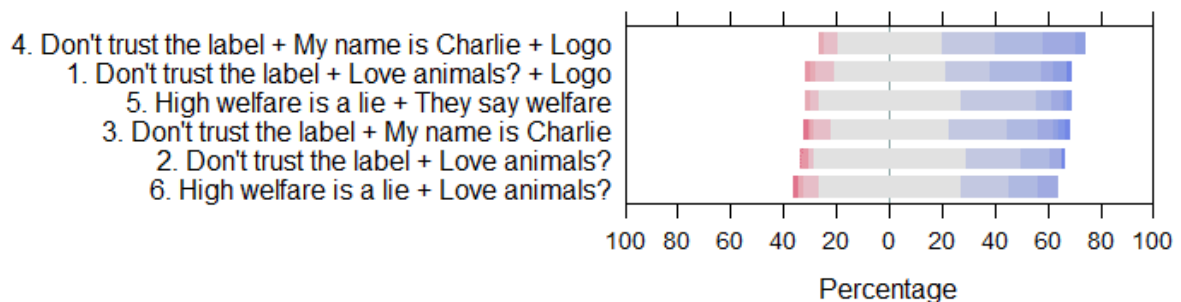
about the scheme.

The two versions featuring the RSPCA logo had the most consistent impact on shifting attitudes. In contrast, the effect of the wording used in the taglines was less clear. Ads using the phrase "high welfare is a lie" appeared to have less influence on reducing perceptions that the RSPCA Assured scheme ensures animal wellbeing. This wording may have prompted more resistance or disbelief, reducing overall receptivity.

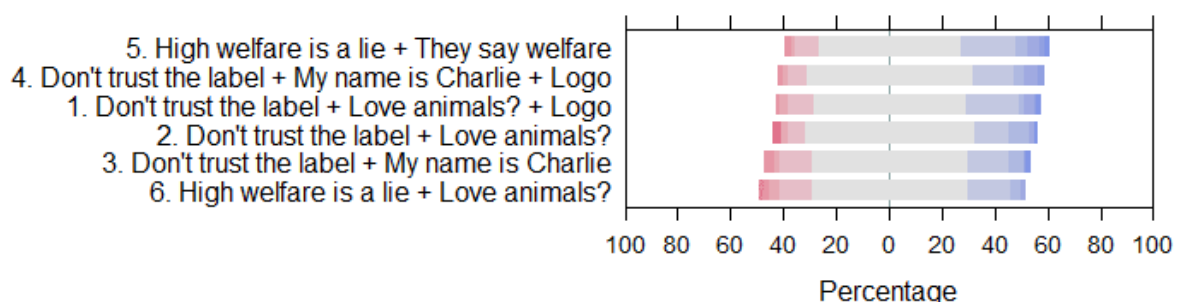
### ...ensures the wellbeing of farmed animals (reversed).



### ...misleads the public by hiding animal cruelty.



### ...it needs to be dropped.



**Figure 3.** Change in response distributions to three statements about the RSPCA Assured labelling scheme. The size of the bars represent how many participants increased (blue), decreased (red) or did not change (grey) their responses between pre and post-test.

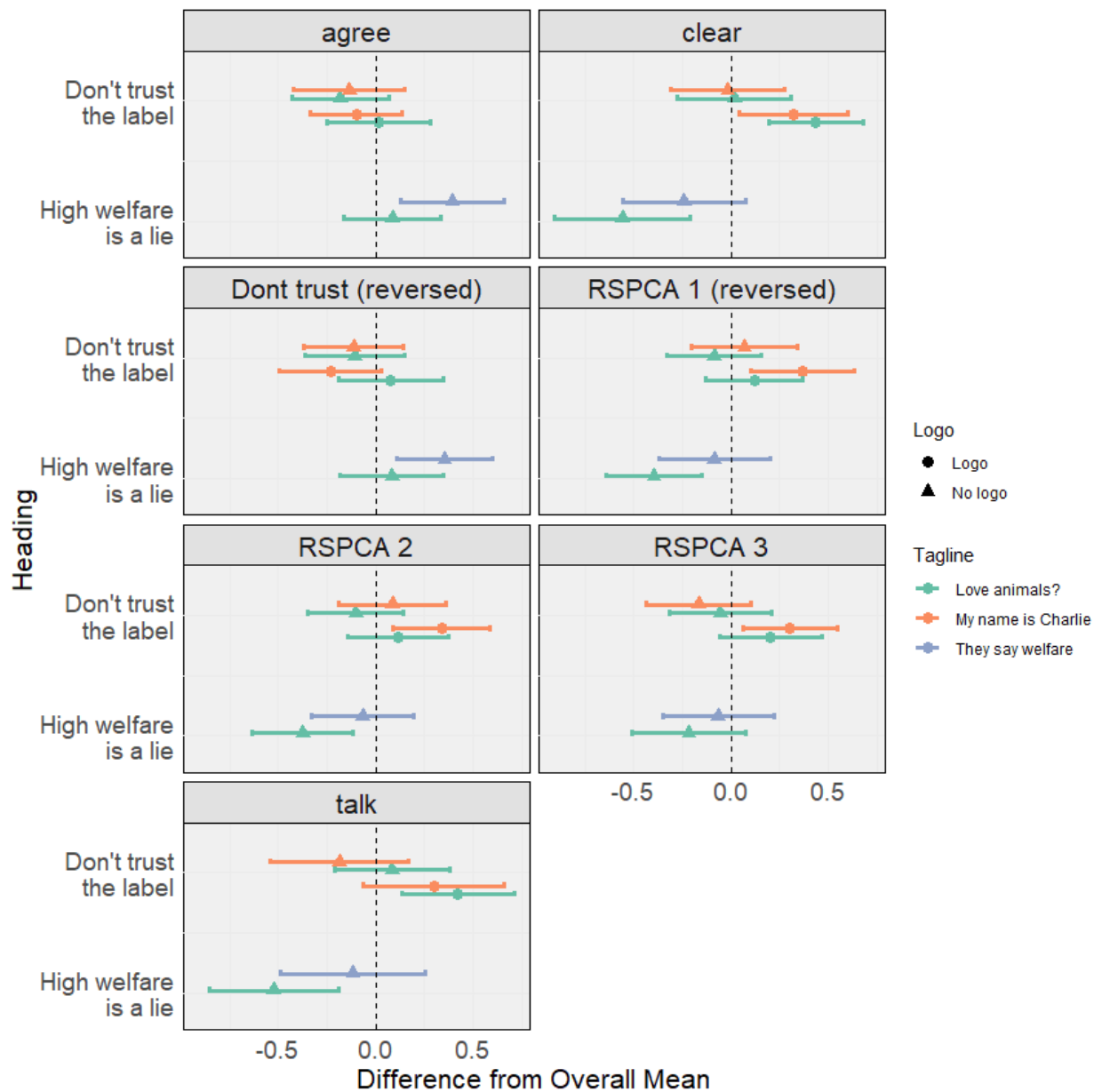
Finally, we analysed whether there were any differences across the ad versions on



the other measures taken after seeing the advert. For each dependent variable, we ran a one-way ANOVA. We found significant differences between ad versions on the three RSPCA Assured measures ( $p = .002$ ,  $.005$ , and  $.040$ , respectively). Responses to three items (perceived manipulateness and mistrust of the ad, and belief that the RSPCA ensure wellbeing) were reverse coded.

We also found significant differences in ratings of advert clarity ( $p < .001$ ), agreement with the advert ( $p = .034$ ), likelihood of talking about the advert in future ( $p < .001$ ), and distrust of the advert ( $p = .040$ ).

There were no significant differences across ad versions for curiosity to visit the website, perceptions of the ad being manipulative, understanding of welfarewashing, or seeing welfarewashing as a serious issue.



**Figure 4.** The centred means and 95% confidence intervals for each of the dependent variables, split by the version of the advert participants saw (Heading, tagline, and presence or absence of the RSPCA logo).

# Discussion

This study highlights significant potential for raising public awareness of welfarewashing and opening up a broader conversation about the credibility of animal welfare claims. Before the study, only 5% of participants were familiar with the term “welfarewashing,” compared to 59% who recognised the concept of “greenwashing,” suggesting the former remains largely under-recognised. Yet, exposure to a single image from the campaign had a striking impact: belief that the RSPCA Assured label guarantees the wellbeing of farmed animals dropped from 69% to 41%, and support for ending the scheme tripled (from 5.5% to 16.7%). This points to the power of even minimal interventions in shifting public perceptions and underscores the opportunity for advocates to challenge misleading welfare claims more directly in public discourse.

Across the different advert versions tested, differences in impact were generally small. This is perhaps unsurprising given the high degree of similarity between the designs; each used the same layout, colour palette, and imagery, with only subtle changes in headline text and the presence or absence of the RSPCA logo. These small variations limited the ability to detect meaningful differences in response.

When focusing on the three key outcome measures, which relate to public perceptions of the RSPCA Assured scheme, the tagline “Don’t trust the label” appeared to perform slightly better than “High welfare is a lie.” However, interpreting this effect is challenging due to limitations in the experimental design. Specifically, the “Don’t trust the label” adverts did not include the “They say welfare...” subheading. Nor did any of the “High welfare is a lie” versions feature the RSPCA logo. This lack of a fully factorial design means that the effects of individual elements and their potential interactions remain unclear. Future studies would benefit from systematically isolating and combining these components to understand their influence better. Even with these limitations, a comparison between two adverts, both without the logo and featuring the “Love animals?...” subheading, suggests that while the “High welfare is a lie” version was rated as marginally more agreeable and clear (not statistically significant), the “Don’t trust the label” version prompted more critical responses across all three questions related to the RSPCA Assured scheme.

Overall, the most consistently effective individual message featured the RSPCA logo alongside the “Don’t trust the label” tagline. There was close competition between the subheadings “My name is Charlie...” and “Love animals?...” with their relative effectiveness varying depending on the specific outcome measured. The strong performance of the adverts including the RSPCA logo likely reflects the logo’s ability to activate existing mental models - viewers’ prior knowledge, beliefs, and associations with the RSPCA – making the message clearer and easier to interpret.

Regarding the tagline, “Don’t trust the label” may have been more effective than “High welfare is a lie” because it does not present as a direct command or instruction. Instead, it invites the audience to engage critically and form their own conclusions,

which can enhance credibility and respect the viewer's agency. This approach aligns with psychological models suggesting that messages encouraging active reflection rather than issuing directives can foster greater acceptance and trust.

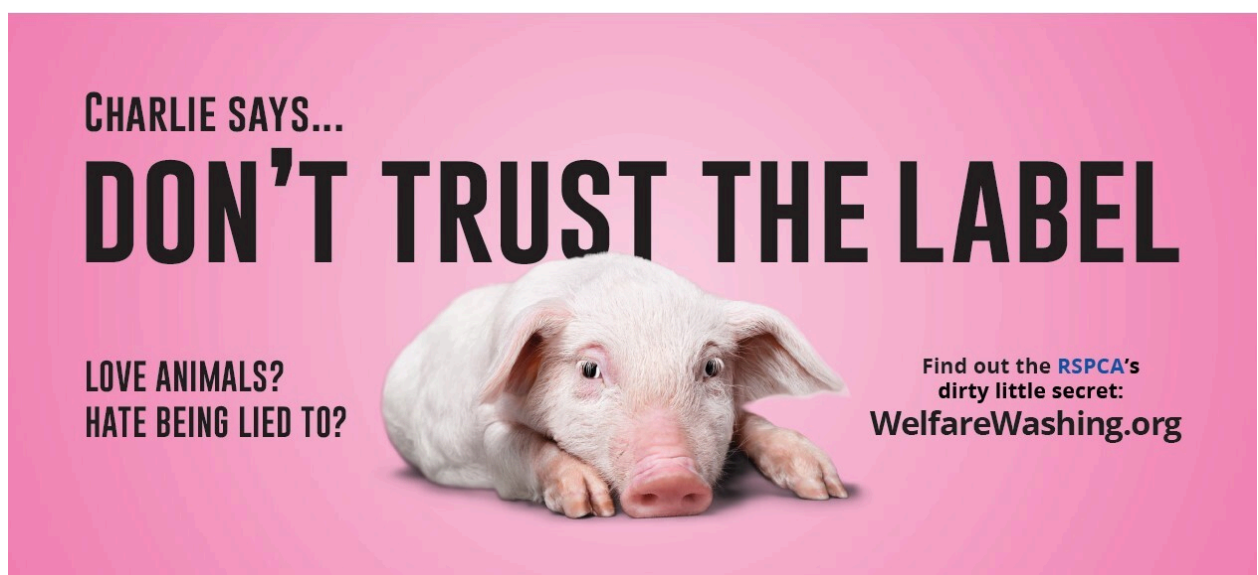
A key takeaway for advocates is the value of messages that respect and encourage audience agency. Invitations to think and question appear to be more persuasive than statements that instruct or dictate beliefs, though further research is needed to confirm this. If possible, finding ways to connect with and build on people's existing mental models can also enhance message effectiveness by making the communication more relatable and easier to understand.

Finally, this study underscores the importance of rigorous message testing to identify the most effective ways to communicate and build support. By continually refining messages based on evidence, advocates can strengthen public understanding and foster deeper engagement with the cause.

## Appendix



Concept 1: "Don't trust the label + Love animals?" with the RSPCA logo.



Concept 2: "Don't trust the label + Love animals?" without the RSPCA logo.

# DON'T TRUST THE LABEL

"MY NAME IS CHARLIE  
AND I ESCAPED CRUELTY."



Find out what  
the **RSPCA** is hiding

**WelfareWashing.org**

Concept 3: "Don't trust the label + My name is Charlie" without the RSPCA logo.

# DON'T TRUST THE LABEL

"MY NAME IS CHARLIE AND  
I ESCAPED **RSPCA** CRUELTY"



Find out the truth  
**WelfareWashing.org**

Concept 4: "Don't trust the label + My name is Charlie" with the RSPCA logo.





Concept 5: "High welfare is a lie + They say nightmare" without the RSPCA logo.



Concept 6: "High welfare is a lie + Love animals?" without the RSPCA logo.