

Journal of Extension

Volume 55 | Number 6

Article 50

12-1-2017

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Recommended Citation

Rumble, J. N., & Lundy, L. K. (2017). Examining Consumer Attitudes and Cultural Indicators Surrounding Local Food. *Journal of Extension*, 55(6), Article 50. <https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/joe/vol55/iss6/50>

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Examining Consumer Attitudes and Cultural Indicators Surrounding Local Food

Abstract

Many consumers are committed to buying local. With the study reported here, we aimed to advance understanding of the influence of culture in the local food movement. The study addressed the presence of cultural indicators in discussions about local food among a sample of Florida residents interested in local food. The influence of culture on participants' thoughts about local food was examined for the purpose of guiding communication and Extension programming surrounding local food. A qualitative thematic analysis revealed the influence of culture through the themes of tradition/ritual, family, local economy, trust, health and quality, experience with local food, and convenience.

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Introduction

Local food has been identified as one of the fastest-growing segments of agriculture ("USDA Confirms," 2013). In October 2015, U.S. Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack announced \$35 million in new funding to support local and regional food systems (Karst, 2015). Previously, more than \$13 million in funding was set aside for the marketing and promotion of farmers' markets, community-supported agriculture, and other direct-to-consumer local food enterprises (Martinez et al., 2010). Beyond these funding sources, a number of federal, state, and local programs are in place to support and promote local food initiatives, including the Community Food Project Grants Program, the WIC (Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children) Farmers' Market Nutrition Program, the Federal State Marketing Improvement Program, and the Specialty Crop Block Grant Program (Martinez et al., 2010). Though government support and consumer demand for local food are increasing, there is no widely accepted definition of what "local food" is (Martinez et al., 2010). One definition, from the 2008 Food, Conservation, and Energy Act, states that "the total distance that a product can be transported and still be considered a locally or regionally produced agricultural food product is less than 400 miles from its origin, or within the State in which it is produced" (Martinez et al., 2010, p. iii).

Consumers who seek out food grown or produced in their local areas have been referred to as "locavores" (OUP Blog, 2007; Ruth-McSwain, 2012). Locavores often identify food quality as a primary motivation for buying local (Ruth-McSwain, 2012). Consumers also may associate local food with having geographic proximity and being produced in certain ways, including through sustainable production, with reduced use of chemicals in fertilizers, under fair labor practices, and with regard for animal welfare. Consumers also may evaluate local food on the

basis of their assessment of particular farmers or farms (Brown, 2002; Halweil, 2002; Martinez et al., 2010). Essentially, how a consumer understands and evaluates local food is due, in large part, to his or her values and perceptions of agriculture. Therefore, understanding how culture influences perceptions of local food is important for guiding communication and Extension programming surrounding local food.

Literature Review

For decades, researchers have examined the role of culture on food habits and the influence of culture on changing food behaviors (Barber, Dodd, & Kolyesnikova, 2009; Chiva, 1997; Cramer, Greene, & Walters, 2011; Higgs & Thomas, 2016; Koçtürk, 1995; Lundy & Ruth-McSwain, 2014; Marshall, 1993; Rook, 1985; Wallendorf & Arnould, 1991). According to Cramer et al. (2011), people "often use food to communicate with others and as a means of demonstrating personal identity, group affiliation and disassociation, and other social categories, such as socioeconomic class" (p. xi). Others have found that food consumption is strongly influenced by social norms and social context, observing, in particular, that people eat differently in social settings than when they are alone (Higgs & Thomas, 2016). Additionally, research has shown that female consumers rely heavily on friends and family for information about food purchases (Barber et al., 2009). Other aspects of culture can influence food purchase decisions as well. Under the umbrella of culture, consumers have reported significant influences from various sources, such as geography, customs and traditions, past experiences, and food consumption patterns of families of origin (Lundy & Ruth-McSwain, 2014).

Americans are increasingly frequenting farmers' markets and joining food cooperatives for a variety of reasons. According to Vasi, Rynes, Li, and Nielsen (2015), the current popularity of farmers' markets is influenced by a convergence of prohealth, prosocial, and proenvironmental factors. In fact, some locavores view consumption of local food as a type of civic duty (Vasi et al., 2015). In other words, "it's not just about the economical exchange; it's a relational and ideological exchange as well" (Vasi, as quoted in Diedrich, 2015, para. 4).

Purpose

To further understanding of the influence of culture on the local food movement, we undertook a study to explore the presence of cultural indicators in discussions about local food among a sample of Florida residents interested in local food. Our research was guided by the following objective: to describe the influence of culture on participants' thoughts about local food in order to guide communication and Extension programming surrounding local food.

Methods

We used a qualitative approach involving focus group methodology to develop a deeper understanding of cultural influences on local food perceptions that became apparent from participant interaction and discussion in a group setting (Morgan, 1997). Focus group discussions can reveal not only what participants think but also the reasoning behind their thoughts (Kitzinger, 1995). Additionally, consumer decisions, such as the decision to participate in the local food movement, are known to be affected by social influences communicated through discussion (Robinson, 1999).

The study participants were consumers who lived in Florida and had an interest in local food. The participants represented five major metropolitan areas throughout Florida and were recruited by an external marketing firm using random digit dialing. The five metropolitan areas differed with regard to crops grown locally. We conducted two focus group sessions in each location to attain environmental triangulation (Guion, Diehl, & McDonald, 2009).

Krueger (1994) recommended that a focus group session consist of seven to 10 participants. Across the 10 focus group discussions conducted for the study, 93 individuals participated, with eight to 12 participants in each focus group. Each focus group session lasted 2 hr and was led by a trained moderator (one member of our author team). An assistant moderator and two note takers were also present at each focus group session. In addition to the notes taken by the note takers, data were gathered through an audio recording and transcription of each focus group session. Participants were assigned pseudonyms during transcription.

The moderator led each focus group discussion using a moderator's guide developed according to Krueger's (1994) recommendations. Prior to data collection, institutional review board approval was attained and the moderator's guide was reviewed and validated by a panel of experts consisting of two agricultural communication faculty and an agriculture industry representative. The panel of experts confirmed the face and content validity of the moderator's guide. The moderator led participants through a discussion by asking open-ended questions about food buying habits and preferences, perceptions of local food, local food buying habits, local food selection, and local food labeling. The moderator's guide had been developed for use in a larger project aimed at understanding consumers' perceptions of local food.

At the close of each focus group session, the moderator reviewed a summary of the focus group discussion and asked participants whether the summary was accurate, allowing them to participate in member checking (Krueger, 2002). Once the transcript of each focus group discussion was finalized, we conducted a thematic analysis using open coding for the presence of culture in the data. For the thematic analysis, we each worked independently and kept an audit trail of the resulting analysis to facilitate the confirmation of final themes and to increase the confirmability and dependability of the results (Creswell, 2007). Culture was operationalized prior to analysis as any customs or values ingrained in the participants as a result of the people and community surrounding them. During analysis, operational definitions were developed for the resulting themes.

Results

The focus group participants included 37 males and 56 females. The participants ranged in age from 21 to 58 and represented a variety of races and ethnicities. Additionally, the participants reported having attained a variety of education levels, from high school diploma to professional degree. The participants included health care professionals, educators, businesspersons, government employees, construction workers, homemakers, food service personnel, and retirees. Due to the small sample size and qualitative approach, results cannot be generalized to all Floridian consumers.

When examining the data for the influence of culture, we found seven themes. These themes were tradition/ritual, family, local economy, trust, health and quality, experience with local food, and convenience.

Tradition/Ritual

On the basis of our audit trail, we operationalized the tradition/ritual theme as observed patterns in actions or behaviors related to local food. Throughout the focus group discussions, participants mentioned personal, familial, and cultural traditions and rituals that influenced their food purchases and preferences. For example, one participant explained her reasons for purchasing greens regularly, saying, "That's a ritual for me in my house on Sunday." Participants nostalgically discussed why they had certain behaviors related to local food. One participant said, "We do what we used to do growing up. I had an aunt and uncle who [raised] pigs, chickens and [grew] grains and [other family members who] had vegetable gardens." Much of Florida's population consists of

transplants from other states and countries; consequently, related customs, traditions, and food trends were reflected in the focus group discussions. Participants mentioned some food traditions or rituals related to specific geographic areas or holidays/seasons.

Family

The idea of influence of family was interwoven throughout the focus group discussions and was operationalized as values associated with family food preferences, learning from family about food, or educating family about food. Participants discussed purchasing or not purchasing certain food types or items because of familial preferences, diet concerns, or health conditions. One participant described the influence of a family member with a health condition on her food purchases, saying, "I live with a person who has diabetes, so we have a variety of things we have to shop for. We look at the nutrition labels."

Participants often referenced their families of origin as key influences on their food purchasing decisions. Throughout the focus group discussions, the phrase "That's just the way I was raised" was repeated multiple times. One participant said, "I pretty much still eat what my parents taught me to eat." Participants' food purchases were also affected by their family members' food beliefs and perceptions. A participant who was influenced by her spouse and his local food preferences said, "My husband is very specific. He thinks the tomatoes the . . . men on the side of the road sell are a lot better than the ones from [a supermarket chain], even if [those tomatoes] are from Fresh from Florida." Similarly, another participant pointed to the influence of her child: "My daughter has decided that she's a vegetarian. She's decided that she wants to not have any GMOs [genetically modified organisms] and other stuff she can't pronounce in foods." Many participants described feeling responsible for educating their family members, particularly their children, about local food and/or healthful eating. One participant described her approach to educating her children about food, saying, "We've been writing our grocery list based on the rainbow. I have a two [year old] and [a] five year old. We literally sit down and write our lists based on the rainbow colors."

Local Economy

Many participants valued their local economies and felt a responsibility to support those economies through purchases of local food. When asked "What does buying local mean to you?" one participant explained, "There's a perception that you're keeping your money locally. The person who is receiving the money is getting it directly, rather than a bunch of middle men or corporations." Participants' economic concerns extended to U.S. food products. For example, one participant said, "Anything that brings jobs to us, to America, counts." Another participant said, "I try not to buy out of the country, for whatever reason. I feel like some farmer in Idaho is going broke because I'm buying my grapes from Chile."

Trust

Participants repeatedly identified trust as a key reason for buying local. The theme of trust was operationalized as trust in producers or the food production process. Trust was often expressed in discussions about knowing the vendors who sell food products or discussions about knowledge of food processing and associated perceptions about quality, safety, and freshness. Participants indicated that buying local food increased their trust in all parts of the food production process, including planting/breeding, growing, harvesting, and processing. One participant said, "I think if you're at a farmers' market, you just have to trust that if they say they are local, they are local."

Health and Quality

The health and quality theme was operationalized as values associated with the health benefits/risks and quality of foods. Many participants, when discussing local food, described making food buying decisions on the basis of health concerns. Several participants discussed selecting or not selecting certain foods because of perceptions that the foods were either good or bad for their health. The health attributes of local food were appealing to a participant who said, "Sometimes it is healthier to eat locally. I know that [local] honey . . . [is] supposed to kind of help your immune system."

Besides describing decision making based on perceptions that particular food products are good or bad for health, participants frequently expressed the opinion that processed or conventional foods are not healthful. Several participants made references to health when discussing food quality indicators or food safety, and a common quality indicator discussed was freshness. For example, one participant commented on the health-conscious nature of society and the perception that local food is fresher and more healthful.

Experience with Local Food

References to personal experiences with local food were common in the focus group sessions. This concept was operationalized as experiences with local food beyond consumption and retail grocery store purchases, including experiences such as visiting a U-pick operation, knowing someone who grows local food, growing food, or knowing what grows in a local area. One participant commented on food he grew: "I've grown stuff in our yard. . . . The best tasting pineapple I've ever had, I grew from a cutting from a [supermarket chain] pineapple. You just can't beat the taste; I mean there's nothing like it." One participant shared his recent local food purchasing experience of buying food along the side of the road: "I just bought a watermelon off the back of a guy's truck. [*laughter*] That is where you get your best watermelon."

Convenience

The topic of convenience also arose during the focus group discussions. The theme of convenience and the associated lack thereof was operationalized as any actions that simplified or complicated the purchase or preparation of food. Many participants discussed having busy lifestyles that demand ease of food purchasing and preparation. They also identified inconveniences associated with local food. An inconvenience mentioned often was the need to visit multiple locations when purchasing local food. Convenience also played a role for participants in considering which local food items to purchase. For example, one participant stated that hard-to-prepare local food items were not going to make it into her shopping cart. She discussed having a preference for local food items that could be eaten raw and said, "We just buy local food [that can be eaten] raw. There's not a whole lot of prep involved except washing it and cutting it." Another participant summarized the discussion on convenience well by saying, "I'm gonna go for something that's convenient. When you have a lot to do, if you have school, and jobs, and kids, if you have all that, you got to go for convenience."

Discussion

We sought to explore the presence of cultural indicators in discussions about local food among a sample of Florida residents who held an interest in local food. Our purpose was to collect data for use in guiding communication and Extension programming surrounding local food. Our qualitative thematic analysis revealed the influence of

culture related to the themes of tradition/rituals, family, local economy, trust, health and quality, experience with local food, and convenience.

When discussing tradition, the participants shared accounts of personal and cultural traditions that influenced their local food purchases. This finding aligns with previous research by Cramer et al. (2011) and Lundy and Ruth-McSwain (2014), who found food to be a source of personal identity as well as an aspect of customs, traditions, and familial activities.

Similarly, the focus group discussions revealed the cultural influences of family on food buying decisions. The participants were influenced by patterns initiated by their parents as well as their families' preferences, health needs, and budgets. This finding is consistent with previous research pointing to the influence of family on food consumption (Kaplan, James, Alloway, & Kiernan, 2011; Spruijt-Metz, Lindquist, Birch, Fisher, & Goran, 2002). As identified by Barber et al. (2009), individuals have a tendency to rely on family and friends for food information, which often affects preferences and purchasing behaviors.

Additional reasons for buying local food centered on cultural influences associated with the local economy, trust, health and quality, and participants' personal experiences with local food. Supporting the local economy through the purchase of local food was important to many participants who communicated a sense of pride when talking about supporting their local economies, communities, and farmers. This finding supports the work of Vasi et al. (2015), which showed that consumers feel a sense of civic duty when considering the purchase of local food due to economical, relational, and ideological values.

Some participants cited lack of convenience as a barrier to purchasing local food. The hustle and bustle of day-to-day living prevented many from having the time or energy to purchase local food. This finding is supported by a previous study that found that participants' need for convenient lifestyles influenced their food customs and purchasing patterns (Lundy & Ruth-McSwain, 2014).

Recommendations

Extension professionals should consider the cultural norms that influence consumers' local food purchases and preferences when communicating about local food. For example, on the basis of the data reported here, Extension professionals may consider using messages that highlight support of the local economy, build trust, communicate health and quality attributes, and connect with consumers' previous local food experiences. Similar key messages may be relevant across geographic regions and programmatic areas. Extension professionals should counsel commodity organizations and growers to participate in state branding programs, such as Go Texan, Jersey Fresh, Ohio Proud, and so forth. Such branding helps consumers identify retail food products that are grown in their states, thus capitalizing on the perception that local food can be a product grown anywhere within a state (Martinez et al., 2010).

Further research should address cultural influences on individuals who have different levels of involvement in the local food movement. A study examining the influence of culture at point of purchase or consumption could also be of value as the study reported here addressed only underlying factors related to perceptions of local food. Communication research could be conducted for the purpose of identifying the effectiveness of various culturally framed messages on local food perceptions, purchases, and preferences. Continued research on cultural influences associated with local food and food in general can provide Extension professionals and the industry with a deeper understanding of food trends and perceptions that can help inform the production, promotion, and policy of agricultural food systems.

Conclusion

A better understanding of cultural influences on people's perceptions of local food provides insights into how consumers evaluate local food according to preexisting values and ideas. The cultural insights revealed in this article provide Extension professionals, across regions and programmatic areas, with background useful in educating stakeholders about communication, marketing, production, and policy surrounding local food as it continues to be one of the fastest growing segments in agriculture.

Acknowledgments

Funding for this research was provided by a U.S. Department of Agriculture/Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services specialty crop block grant.

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