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Hagolani-Albov, Sophia

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SOPHIA E. HAGOLANI-ALBOV

University of Helsinki

MARIA EHRNSTRÖM-FUENTES

Hanken School of Economics

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ABSTRACT

The rise of the globalized, industrial food system has widened the distance between producers and consumers. Over the last several years there has been a call for closing the distance between producers and consumers, and for more transparency in food systems. This need can be filled via procurement of local food, but there are often barriers to connect producers and consumers even when they live in proximity. The REKO model (short for Fair Consumption in Swedish) offers space for virtual reconnection via Facebook, which is used as its communication and ordering platform. The use of an already existing platform, which is often already widely in use among producers and consumers, has allowed the REKO concept to replicate and diffuse very effectively. Thus, REKO is a situated example of how digital interaction can radically alter the producer/consumer interactions in a local food community without having to invest heavily in infrastructures and technological developments. Drawing on experiences from the REKO network, this article explores the opportunities for food system reconnection, as well as the limitations of utilizing an existing technological platform to reconfigure local food interactions.

KEYWORDS

short supply chains
producer–consumer
interactions
alternative food
networks
digital space
social media
local food
Finland
foodscapes

INTRODUCTION

The rise of the globalized, industrial food system has had many deleterious effects, including widening the distance between producers and consumers due to long, opaque supply chains (Forssell and Lankoski 2015; Renting et al. 2003). Over the last several years there have been numerous calls for more transparency and lessening the distance between producers and consumers (De Bernardi et al. 2020; Ilbery and Maye 2005) as one step to counter the harms associated with globalized and industrial food systems. Many scholars stress the need to create alternative food networks (AFNs) to strengthen the direct interactions between producer and consumer in the local sphere. An increasing number of scholars are characterizing the rise of AFNs, which depend on direct interactions between producers and consumers, as a process of ‘reconnection’ (DesRivières et al. 2017; Dowler et al. 2009; Kneafsey et al. 2008).

Kneafsey et al. define reconnection as ‘a process rather than an end-state that conveys a sense of “doing and becoming”’ (2008: 32), which (re)connects producers with their markets, while consumers are (re)connected with the people who are producing their food. As a process of change, these reconnections can be both economically motivated – as producers seek to enhance local market opportunities and add value to their products – and by a moral desire to create an ethical, ecologically sustainable, and locally grounded food systems (Kneafsey et al. 2008). Reconnection can also refer to the exchange of information and transaction of locally sourced food that penetrate the mundane practices of everyday life for food producers and consumers (Bos and Owen 2016). When sustained over time, such reconnections can foster fundamental changes in consumer and producer behaviour, leading to novel innovations around how food is grown, distributed and consumed on a larger scale (Rossi et al. 2019).

Digital platforms dedicated to the trade of food are gaining traction, particularly in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic due to its impact on food supply chains (Michel-Villarreal et al. 2021). Thus, under these rapidly changing conditions, digital spaces have become increasingly important for the direct procurement of local food (Chang and Meyerhoefer 2021; Zollet et al. 2021). ‘Digital foodscapes’ are also increasingly acknowledged to play a fundamental role re-shaping relationships with food (e.g., Lewis 2018; Schneider et al. 2018), which has led some scholars to suggest there is a ‘digital turn’ in food studies (Goodman and Jaworska 2020). Yet, to understand how these digital spaces contribute to material and durable changes in food systems, we need to more broadly understand how digital platforms foster reconnection between producers and consumers.

The aim for this article is to explore the opportunities afforded for reconnection, limitations or risk of disconnection encountered when utilizing Facebook as the digital platform for producer–consumer reconnection in AFNs. The REKO model (an abbreviation for the Swedish *REjäl Konsumtion*, which in English translates to ‘fair consumption’) provides a unique example of an AFN that has been adopted in many countries, mainly thanks to its reliance on an already existing digital platform – Facebook. We draw on experiences from the REKO food network, which is a concrete example of how an already existing and widely used digital platform can foster reconnection that radically alters interactions in a local food community, even in times of rapidly changing circumstances (e.g., brought on by the pandemic).

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Due to its novelty and rapid spread across national boundaries, the REKO model its role in reconnecting consumers with producers in the local sphere remains underexplored in research compared to some other common forms of AFN, like community supported agriculture (CSA). Based on the documented emergence of the REKO network, and supported by observer participation and participant observation, survey, interviews with Finnish producer and consumer participants (see Table 1), we address the following research questions: (1) how does REKO enable reconnections to take place? (2) What are the opportunities and risks associated with generating and maintain reconnections when building an AFN on an already existing platform such as Facebook?

This article continues with an explanation of our theoretical framework. Then, we describe our materials and methods and briefly reflect on our positionality as researchers and participant observers/observer participants in the REKO network. This is followed by a description of the case context, including how REKO has been explored in the academic literature. We then share our findings and trace out the opportunities and risk/limitations that have emerged as a result of using Facebook as the digital platform for producer–consumer interactions in the REKO model. We briefly discuss the impact of COVID-19 on the REKO network and how the REKO design has been uniquely suited to respond to some of the challenges brought by the pandemic. Finally, we draw some conclusions about the (virtual) reconnections achieved via REKO, stemming from the opportunities and limitations of using Facebook as a platform.

THEORETICAL AND CONTEXTUAL FRAME

To understand how digital spaces contribute to reconfiguring producer and consumer relations in ways that support reconnection, we will first briefly discuss what we mean by reconnection, drawing on the work of Kneafsey et al. (2008) and Dowler et al. (2009). As Dowler et al. explain, “reconnection” implies the bringing together of different elements of the food system – producers, consumers, markets, knowledge and nature’ (2009: 205).

In its common usage ‘the word “reconnection” carries overtones of revival or reestablishment of a “lost” or damaged connection, with echoes of nostalgia for a “Golden Age” when things were better’ (Dowler et al. 2009: 204). However, this is not how the term is used in food studies. Instead, Dowler et al. (2009) and other food studies scholars stress that ‘reconnections’ involve ‘complex thinking, understanding and ingrained behaviours, to which a host of related actors, material and social institutions [...] contributed in mediating “reconnection”’ (Kneafsey et al. 2008; Dowler et al. 2009: 204). Rather than an end-state, this reconnection is understood as a process of changing behaviours through ‘alternative’ food practices that become more embedded in people’s lives, often aligning with ethical ideologies and practices (Kneafsey et al. 2008). Thus, these processes reconnect people and places associated with food production in ways that support the emergence of AFNs wherein things can be done differently than in globalized food systems that rely on long supply chains. These reconnections can give rise to shared learning and relations of mutual support, which can foster fundamental changes in how consumers and producers relate to food (Dowler et al. 2009). When sustained over time such changes also reconfigure the larger landscape of agri-food systems as they allow for the emergence of

new (logistical) assemblages and innovative practices around food (Rossi et al. 2019).

While the forms of communication and models studied by Kneafsey et al. (2008) were mostly mediated through in person encounters rather than virtual platforms, this term has been brought forward into the internet age, describing reconnection that occurs in online spaces as ‘virtual reconnection’ (Bos and Owen 2016). Bos and Owen (2016) use the English context to explore the role of what they term ‘virtual reconnection’ as a feature of the online spaces of AFNs. They see that ‘online and social media extend and supplement the interrelated socio-material connections taking place in AFNs’ offline spaces thus adding an additional layer to the material, tactile spaces’ (Bos and Owen 2016: 12). They find that virtual reconnections can help producers to establish relations to new and larger customer bases and the extension of consumer–producer relations ‘into a virtual realm not only complements existing producer–consumer or member relationships’, but also organizes members and customers’ existing social networks (Bos and Owen 2016: 12). These processes contribute to the development of AFNs as customers also actively ‘assist in the development of organizational reputation and ultimately, income or sustainability’ (Bos and Owen 2016: 12).

Common to all forms of AFNs – whether in-person or online – the ability to support reconnection of the food system requires some form of meeting platform where the producer and consumer participants can share knowledge and trade food. Traditionally, the market square or other physical spaces functioned as this meeting platform. However, there are often barriers to connecting producers and consumers. For example, funding is often required to develop alternative spaces (Kirwan et al. 2013), increased time spent selling can reduce profitability for producers (Jarosz 2008), organizing logistics and marketing can be costly (Poças Ribeiro et al. 2020), limited consumer awareness about local food and decreasing interest to commit long term can lead to an insufficient demand (Feagan and Henderson 2009; Lam 2020).

Reconnections as meaningful encounters

Goodman (2018) explains how digital connective actions serve to develop networks that connect the digital world and the non-digital world, including through the development of materially significant networks. These connections span from the very real humans who are behind the internet posts to those who are on the ground working in with the soil to produce food.

Some scholars suggest that this digital reorganization of the distribution and provision of food can reduce the amount of money and time spent on the actual trade, while also widening access and decreasing the environmental impact related to selling and buying food (Dal Gobbo et al. 2021). In addition, digital platforms can promote network building and relationships of trust (De Bernardi et al. 2019), which are key elements needed to sustain AFNs over time (Brunori 2007). However, Schneider et al.’s (2018) review of the research on digital aspects of food activism suggests that most studies focus narrowly on individuals’ food-related practices online and the role social media plays in shaping individual identities, rather than on how digital platforms can lead to more fundamental transformations of the wider food system (see Rossi et al. 2019).

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Studies on local trade through AFNs suggest that online spaces have the potential to foster deeper (re)connections and support some of the beneficial characteristics of in-person encounters among producers and consumers (De Bernardi et al. 2019; Johnson 2013; Radcliffe et al. 2021). Dal Gobbo et al. 'found that digital systems are not simply means for accessing certain kinds of food: they actively shape practices in specific ways, changing the overall meanings, material organization and embodied interactions with it [food]' (2021: 8). Bos and Owen (2016) also assert that virtual reconnections extend beyond the material realm and foster reconnections in virtual spaces through social interaction, participation and exchange, such as social media platforms.

Radcliffe et al. (2021) point out online markets can only be beneficial to and complement in-person markets where the necessary infrastructure exists. In remote, rural areas, the lack of reliable internet and electrical systems are barriers that can create inequalities in accessibility (Radcliffe et al. 2021). While internet use and access are common in some settings, it is important to remember 'that online connectivity and use of social media is not a universal phenomenon amongst all demographics and geographical spaces' (Bos and Owen 2016: 3).

COVID-19 AND AFNS

The COVID-19 pandemic has had many visible and startling impacts on globalized food supply chains, especially in areas heavily dependent on imported food (Garnett et al. 2020). The stark images of sold-out groceries shelves may have pushed some consumers – who would not under normal circumstances – to consider participating in local food systems (Hobbs 2020). In Canada, the temporary shortages of specific items in grocery stores and consumers' desire to limit the number of steps between production consumption – in support of reducing the risk of virus transmission – increased interest in buying food directly from local farms (Goddard 2021).

Under these circumstances, online businesses and markets were well-positioned to respond to the rapid surge in demand for locally produced food and challenges of the restrictions imposed on social gatherings (Moore 2020; Klisch et al. 2020; Radcliffe et al. 2021). Simultaneously, the COVID-19 restrictions on public gatherings accelerated the digitalization of AFNs in many parts of the world (Radcliffe et al. 2021; Moore 2020; Zollet et al. 2021). Zollet et al.'s (2021) study of local grassroots responses to the restrictions imposed in Italy, shows how direct deliveries to households increased and, due to cooperative efforts between local farmers and IT-specialists, many e-commerce platforms were rapidly developed to handle orders.

In relation to disruptions in the trade of local food resulting from unforeseen circumstances, Michel-Villarreal et al. (2021) suggest that digital technologies are important and need to be further developed to support local trade and increase the resilience of local food systems. Radcliffe et al.'s (2021) case study of the debates surrounding whether to move a farmers' market online in the Northwest Territories in Canada during the COVID-19 lockdowns points to the virtual barriers of having to rapidly find new digital solutions to support local trade. Our study of the REKO model will make visible that new digital platforms and costly solutions are not necessarily needed in these kinds of circumstances, rather AFNs that make use of already existing platforms and technologies can help local communities to engage in virtual reconnections in rapidly changing contexts.

METHODOLOGY

This research design follows a qualitative case study approach (Yin 2018), which allowed us to bring together and explore context-embedded information across multiple data sources (Eisenhardt and Graebner 2007; Langley and Royer 2006), collected across multiple time periods (Woodside and Wilson 2003). A case study approach was well suited for this study as it investigated a real-world phenomenon (the opportunities and risks of using Facebook for REKO producer–consumer interactions and reconnections) within its own context.

Case selection

REKO is a novel AFN that has deliberately chosen to use Facebook as its operating platform. In addition, the REKO network has been in continuous operation in the Facebook space since 2013, which is a suitable length of time to allow for uncovering findings related to the opportunities and risks of using Facebook for food system reconnection. In addition, the REKO model has reproduced widely while continuing to utilize Facebook as a platform. Thus, given the length of time and reach of REKO on Facebook, it provides a rich set of data that allows for an in-depth study of a complex real-life phenomenon. In addition, both authors have extensive experience with the REKO model, and access to datasets relevant to the study. Sophia Hagolani-Albov became acquainted with the REKO in 2013 and has researched producer and consumer experiences in REKO. Maria Ehrnström-Fuentes was a volunteer administrator in one of the first Finnish REKO groups, which included active involvement in the day-to-day management of the local group from 2013 until December 2020. Both authors continue to be involved on the consumer side of REKO. Thus, both authors' long-term engagement with the REKO network allowed for an in-depth interpretation of the findings and the identification of analytical categories that otherwise might not be possible.

Data collection

Data collected for case-study research is often drawn from multiple sources, which can include both primary and secondary (archival) sources (Yin 2018), as well as the researchers' own documented personal experiences grounded in the case study situation (Langley and Royer 2006). The use of multiple sources allows for the triangulation of research findings and provides a rich descriptive account of the phenomenon being studied (Farquhar et al. 2020; Langley and Royer 2006).

The data sets collected and presented herein (summarized in Table 1) are the culmination of several years of participant observation and observer participation (Jorgensen 2015) with the REKO network, combined with more focused data collected in relation to the development and growth of REKO. The general topics explored in Hagolani-Albov's work in 2015 and 2017 related to what made REKO different from other types of grassroots alternative food distribution networks in Finland. The data collected by Ehrnström-Fuentes in 2016–18 focused on how the REKO system has contributed to increased sustainability within the agri-food sector. In Table 1, we indicate which research projects and resulting publications were related to which aspects of the data that formed the textual corpus used in the analysis for this

Table 1: Empirical data collected in connection to the REKO network.

Type of data	Type of respondent	Total respondents	Year(s) collected	Researcher and related works	Resource name
Semi-structured interviews	Producers/Consumers	15	2015	Hagolani-Albov 2015 and Hagolani-Albov and Halvorson 2017	A1–A15
Semi-structured interviews	Facebook admins / Founders	4	2018	Ehrnström-Fuentes and Leipämaa-Leskinen 2019	B1–B4
Facebook discussions	Producers/Consumers/ Facebook admins	5 discussion threads	2016–18	Ehrnström-Fuentes and Leipämaa-Leskinen 2019	C1–C5
Surveys	Producers	86	2018	Ehrnström-Fuentes et al. 2019	D
Semi-structured interviews	Producers	18	2018	Ehrnström-Fuentes et al. 2019	E1–E18

article. In bringing these sets of interview and other text-based data together, a rich data set was formed to create the empirical base for this case study focused on how the use of Facebook enables reconnections (or creates risks of disconnections) within the REKO network.

Data analysis

For our analysis we brought together the transcribed text of our respective data sets to form a single corpus. Our analysis followed an iterative categorization (Neale 2016), which entailed rereading and initially deductively recoding the text to identify utterances within the corpus related to the use of Facebook as a platform for performing the producer–consumer interactions in REKO. This initial coding was complimented by a second round of inductive coding that allowed topics within the text to emerge more organically over the body of the corpus (Neale 2016).

With this coding strategy in place, it became apparent that the risks and opportunities connected to producer–consumer interaction via Facebook (reconnection and/or disconnection) were articulated in alignment with critical events or phases that occurred during different stages of the evolution of the REKO network. These four critical events or phases – start-up, maintenance, intermittent and (re-)activation – were identified based on our previous research (Hagolani-Albov 2015; Hagolani-Albov and Halvorson 2017; Ehrnström-Fuentes et al. 2019, Ehrnström-Fuentes and Leipämaa-Leskinen 2019) and archival documentation (REKO 2021; online communication). In case study research, critical events are defined as ‘well-bounded episodes in the history of a case marked by a particular occurrence or specific pattern of activity’ (García-Montoya and Mahoney 2020: 4). However, it should be noted that these events or phases which are identifiable in the respondents’ descriptions in the corpus, are overlapping rather than concurrent processes. In the findings, we discuss these four phases in more detail in relation to the evolution of the REKO system and the

opportunities for reconnection and/or risk of disconnection present in each event stage.

CASE BACKGROUND: THE REKO MODEL

The REKO model began in 2013 in a Swedish speaking area of western Finland. The initial two REKO groups were a pioneering effort to set up an AFN with the intent of bringing producers and consumers into direct interaction (Ehrnström-Fuentes and Leipämaa-Leskinen 2019). The REKO model was initially conceived by Thomas Snellman, an organic farmer, who was distressed at the livelihood prospects for small-scale, organic farmers in Finland. He was inspired to start REKO after a visit to France and a first-hand experience with the AMAP system (Association pour le Maintien d'une Agriculture Paysanne, in English the Association for Maintaining Small-Scale Family Farming). The AMAP system runs based on a fixed term – usually seasonal – contract between producers and consumers that details the types and amount of product that will be exchanged. This system allows even quite small-scale producers to connect with a reliable consumer base (Lagane 2015). When Thomas returned to Finland, he undertook the development of a similar system (REKO 2021). Initially, the system REKO used was inspired very directly by the AMAP system, meaning producers and consumers signed contracts for two-month periods, wherein both parties committed to sell/buy products every two weeks (B1, B2 2018). This system quickly was deemed unwieldy and unsustainable within the first few months of deliveries (B2 2018). Producers felt stressed that they might not have enough to sell, and consumers felt they did not want to commit to picking up their products at a specific time for such a long period (B2 2018). To support increased flexibility for consumers and producers, the REKO pilot groups started using Facebook groups as an ordering platform (B1 2018). Facebook was chosen because it presented a space that was free to access and, in many cases, was already in use by the participating producers and consumers (B2 2018). Finland has a track record of quite high internet penetration (DataReportal 2020). For example, when REKO was founded, 49 per cent of the Finnish population used social media regularly, which had increased to 69 per cent in 2020 (OSF 2012, 2020). The decision to shift away from contracts and to à la carte orders via Facebook gave all participants the flexibility that they wanted. Producers did not have to post products to sell for every distribution and consumers did not have to sign long term contracts and could choose to purchase (or not) for each distribution event.

It should be noted that there are two distinct aspects to the producer–consumer interaction in the REKO food model. The primary interaction, which is the offer/choosing/purchase of products takes place digitally on Facebook. The second interaction takes place in person during designated REKO pickup events. To clarify, these pickup events are not like a traditional farmers' market, even though the producer and consumer are coming to the same physical place for a sales exchange (see Hagolani-Albov [2015] for an extended narrative description of a REKO pick-up). These pickups happen at an interval determined by each group, usually once a week or bi-weekly, and sometimes vary based on the season. In addition, the event itself is quite short, usually between twenty and 60 minutes from start to finish. While

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there are many interesting aspects to the interaction and atmosphere created by the in-person portion of the REKO interaction (see e.g., Hagolani-Albov 2015; Hagolani-Albov and Halvorson 2017), this article focuses on the digital interaction.

One of the founding design principles of the REKO model is the absence of a centralized administrative or rulemaking body for all REKO groups. This allows new groups to form organically based on just a few loosely defined rules that serve as an underlying ethos. The rules, which were adopted in Finland in 2015, are: '1) no middlemen allowed; 2) the food items sold should be as local as possible; 3) ethical trade – preferably organic; and 4) open and transparent operations' (Ehrnström-Fuentes and Leipämaa-Leskinen 2019: 10). These rules, along with some other useful information for those interested to start a REKO group, are readily available on the Finnish website <https://aitojamakuja.fi> (2021), which serves as a digital home for information about REKO in the Nordics. Yet, there is no central body to ensure enforcement of these rules and each newly formed REKO can determine how it chooses to abide by these suggestions.

A REKO group can be initiated from the consumer or producer side. Due to how Facebook functions, the group must have an administrator. The administrator is a voluntary role and can be a producer or consumer. In many cases REKO groups will have multiple participants acting as administrators; however, this role can also be an individual. The pilot REKO groups were set up as private communication groups and many REKO groups have followed this model. Some REKO groups are public groups or set up as selling groups rather than communication groups. The barrier to joining a REKO group is quite low. After finding a local REKO group on Facebook (usually the name of the location preceded or followed by REKO, e.g., 'REKO Myrskylä' or 'Lapinjärvi REKO') consumers can participate by simply sending a request to join. To be allowed to sell producers normally must ask the administrators for access to post their weekly (or bi-weekly) offerings on the group wall, provided what they want to sell is in accordance with the group rules (specific rules are set by each administrative group). Generally, administrators will avoid having too many producers selling the same product (e.g. eggs), and administrators are responsible for making sure the producers are not reselling products. Direct sales are an important facet of the REKO ethos; however, producers can sell raw products or prepared items, like baked goods.

The REKO Facebook group page is the main hub of digital interaction between producers and consumers. Producers post what they have for sale in advance of each REKO pick-up. Consumers can browse the producers' posts and indicate purchases by commenting (see Figure 1). Consumers do not have to buy a specific amount or even buy regularly to participate. Producers also can participate at their discretion and are not penalized if they choose not to post for a designated pick-up event.

The use of Facebook as an enabling infrastructure of the REKO food network is often noted as one of the main reasons contributing to the rapid growth and diffusion of the REKO model. For example, one of the original REKO group in Finland was founded with 30 consumer-participants, and it now has approximately 14,000, which is approximately 20 per cent of the total population of that area (OSF 2023). However, it should be noted that due to the presence of passive members in the Facebook groups, it is difficult to determine a definitive number of active participants. As of May 2020, it was

The image shows a screenshot of a Facebook post from a user named 'Producer' dated '2 June at 14:30'. The post text reads: 'Hello REKO customers - we are very excited to bring some fresh veggies straight from our garden to the next meeting time. We will have available: a variety of salads, cabbages, root vegetables like carrots, kohlrabi, and redcurrants.' The post includes a collage of four photos: a field of green leafy vegetables, a bunch of cabbages, a purple kohlrabi, and a bunch of red currants. Below the photos, there are 8 likes and 15 comments. The comments section shows three entries: 'Consumer 1' ordering '2 liters of currents and a bushel of carrots', 'Producer' replying 'Great! Please bring cash to the pickup or use mobile pay', and 'Consumer 2' repeating the order. Yellow callout boxes with arrows point to specific elements: 'Producer posts from their personal or business Facebook account' (top right), 'Producer describes products available' (text description), 'Producer posts example pictures of products' (photo collage), 'Consumers utilize comments to make orders or ask questions' (comments section), and 'Producer is able to directly respond to consumer' (producer's reply).

Figure 1: This is a generalized example of what a post looks like on a REKO Facebook group page. It is common for producers to include pictures as well as a text description. Producers and consumers interact through the comments.

estimated in the Nordics there are upwards of 500 local groups with a total of 1.5 million participants (Perkins 2020) (see Figure 2).

It has also proven difficult to make a fixed list of the total number of REKO groups as new groups are constantly forming and there is no central register for the groups. Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, even more groups have formed organically in new locations, particularly in English-speaking parts of the world, including Australia, the United States and South Africa (Knight 2020; Mefferd 2020; Trollip 2020).

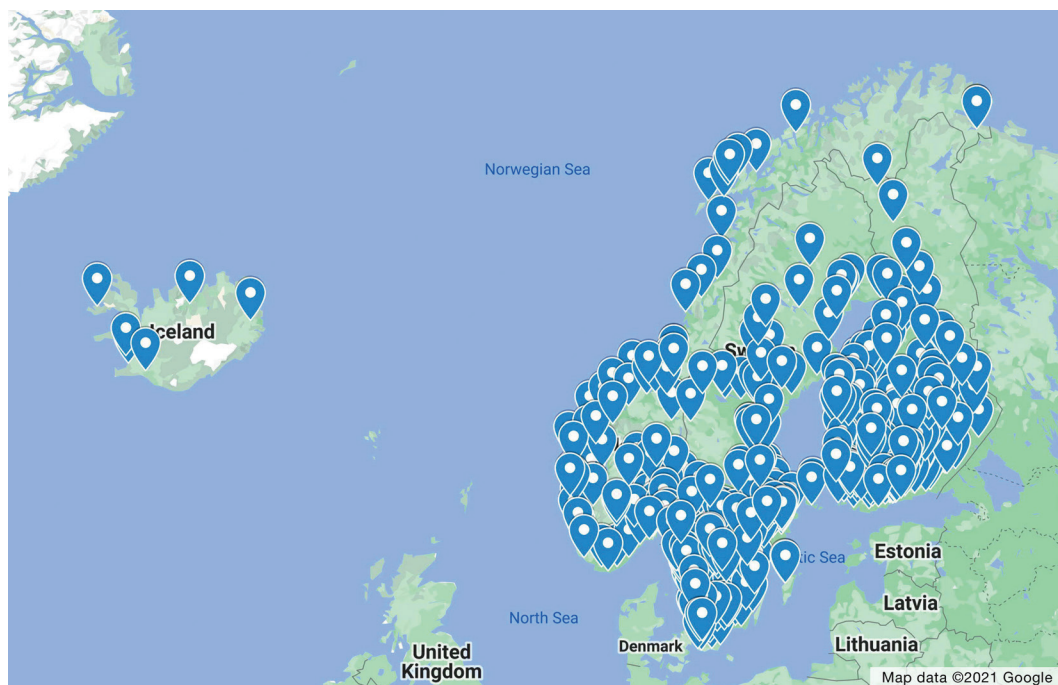


Figure 2: 2021 map of the REKO groups in the Nordics (Aitojamakuja.fi).

REKO in previous research

Studies on the REKO model have emerged in the academic literature in the past few years; however, studies on REKO are still few in comparison to long standing AFN models like the French AMAP system or CSAs. To date there have not been any studies with a specific focus on the role of Facebook in enabling virtual reconnection. Within the REKO-focused literature there have been more studies on the consumer experience of the REKO model. These consumer perspective studies include, examining local food consumption through the REKO model utilizing behavioural reasoning theory (Kumar et al. 2021b; Murphy 2020), examining mundane consumer resistance (Leipämaa-Leskinen 2021), using social practice theory to explain consumer drop-out (Lam 2020), examining what drives purchases in local food consumption (Kumar et al. 2021a), and an investigation into the role of consumers in food system oriented sustainable transition (Engeseth 2020).

Through our prior research into REKO, we have more closely examined the producer and administrative aspects of the REKO model, including examining the role of and perceptions around sustainability by REKO producers (Ehrnström-Fuentes et al. 2019), and using conflicts that accompanied the scaling of the REKO model in Finland to examine how boundary negotiations play a role in the continued development of the REKO system (Ehrnström-Fuentes and Leipämaa-Leskinen 2019). There have also been more topical overviews of REKO (Hagolani-Albov 2015; Hagolani-Albov and Halvorson 2017). In addition, Szymoniuk and Valtari (2018) have examined the potential of REKO as a new model of sustainable marketing.

All the papers cited above mention Facebook to at least some degree as it is an integral facet of the REKO model. However, they do not focus solely on how Facebook acts as an intermediary and enabler of producer–consumer reconnection and the kind of opportunities and limitations that the use of Facebook produces. A notable exception is Hernandez (2020), which focused specifically on the shortcomings of Facebook as a platform for REKO with concrete recommendations for the development of a free-standing web platform. However, this analysis of the REKO model overlooks the potential for food system reconnection within and across multiple food geographies. In this article, our key contribution to the REKO and AFN literature is to provide a more nuanced understanding of the impact of Facebook as the platform where the digital interactions of the REKO model play out.

FINDINGS

Next, we present our findings related to how the Facebook-based REKO system has enabled reconnections among local producers and consumers. We seek to advance the current literature by highlighting the opportunities for virtual reconnections that Facebook has provided REKO. We also discuss the limitations and risks associated with utilizing an existing technological platform like Facebook to reconfigure local food interaction, inclusive of the possible disconnections that may occur as a result of Facebook’s limitations as a food system platform.

The findings are presented structured around four critical event types or phases in which specific patterns related to reconnection and disconnection could be identified. It should be noted that these events or phases are descriptive of overlapping processes, and we do not intend to indicate that they always have an exact start, end or duration. The first phase or event is the start-up when the initial growth of a REKO group occurs and during which reconnections occur at multiple levels, both intragroup and across groups. Second, during the maintenance phase, the trade has settled into a pattern, and the organization of the system begins to solidify (what could be described as institutionalization); this is a period when the risk of disconnection become more pronounced due to the limitations of the Facebook platform. Third, we identified intermittent periods where attempts are made to establish other forms of direct trade by moving away from Facebook. Finally, the fourth phase, which we describe as (re)activation, is defined by external factors (e.g., COVID-19) that lead to a strengthening of reconnections.

Start-up phase: Opportunities for reconnection

The use of Facebook as the platform for the REKO model producer–consumer interactions has been a key factor in the widespread adoption of REKO and it has enabled a multitude of reconnections to take place both locally and across national borders. As the founder of the system expressed in an interview in 2018:

I, myself realized very quickly that Facebook provided unimagined opportunities with discussions in real time and great flexibility. There are many things that made REKO work so well through Facebook. You don’t have to talk about money to maintain the system and you don’t have to create any marketing systems, everything is available to everyone. You can just start using it. REKO has completely shaken my reality

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and everyday life [...]. During this journey I have come to know a large number of persons and collaborated with many authorities and other actors [...] at the same time, I know that what we have created together makes a big difference for a lot of people.

(B1 2018)

The newly established direct contact with consumers is particularly cherished by producers who are used to selling to retail, as a vegetable grower in western Finland noted:

It is the direct contact with the customers that is the most important part about REKO ... One gets to discuss the product at REKO while with the retail dealers you only discuss price. That's not so stimulating or uplifting, so it's really valuable that at REKO you can talk about the actual product and its quality.

(E13 2018)

However, one of the most central benefits is there are no direct fees for using the Facebook platform in this capacity. There are aspects of Facebook that are monetized, for example using the 'boost' function to have posts show to a wider group of potential consumers, but REKO groups are not required to use this function (and to our knowledge very few do). Thus, the use of Facebook does not require any extra funding, common in other types of community-oriented AFNs (Kirwan et al. 2013; Poças Ribeiro et al. 2020). As a cattle farmer in western Finland noted:

You do not really need to invest anything in marketing, like paying for the commercials or something like that, or even have someone make a home page for you. You just put out the ad on the REKO page on Facebook, collect the orders and then you go there. I mean even the administrators of the groups work for free.

(E1 2018)

There is a low threshold of technical expertise needed to use the Facebook platform. The infrastructure of the platform is built and maintained by Facebook. All the functions that are necessary for the producers and consumers to interact already existed on the Facebook platform. 'Everything takes care of itself through the Facebook page. Producers put themselves their products before each delivery and customer orders during the producer's post' (A8 2015).

There are freely available features built into the Facebook platform like automatic translation, which are utilized in the Finnish context in areas where the producer–consumer base includes both Finnish and Swedish speaking Finns. Having a feature like translation would be time and/or cost prohibitive on a freestanding platform. Thus, the AFN formed through the REKO model does not have to create a freestanding digital platform that connects the consumers with the producers, which is time and resource intensive.

Facebook has also proved useful in the diffusion of the REKO model. While there are paid options for marketing, Facebook is set up to encourage electronic word of mouth marketing, which does not carry a separate cost (Engeseth 2020). The electronic and traditional word of

mouth marketing from an engaged consumer or producer is an extremely powerful tool (Huete-Alcocer 2017). As one producer indicated, '[o]ur ring has grown through word of mouth. The rumour spreads by itself' (A9 2015).

While the direct producer–consumer interactions that occur in private groups do not appear in one's public feed, there have been many participants that have shared their REKO experience through posts to their own feed. This 'free marketing' that occur within networks of Facebook friends has enabled consumers that otherwise would not be so interested in local food to reconnect with producers in their own community.

REKO is as far as I can see an incredibly easy and well-functioning model combining good fresh local food, fair consumption, and re-establishing the trustful connection between food producers and consumers. It gives a personal dimension to food, it is empowering both for producers and consumers.

(A10 2015)

In addition, if there is a member who is a friend with someone that is part of the same group, they will often get notifications about the interactions their friends are having. This can be a good way to discover new products and producers within an individual REKO group and serves as a reminder to place their own orders for the next food delivery. Thus, groups that have opted for a public group setting can reap even more benefit from electronic word of mouth and the role of Facebook notifications among friends (albeit at the expense of some of the privacy of members interacting in the group). Also, within the posts of a product offering, consumers can help with the marketing of their favourite products, as noted by a vegetable grower in the Helsinki area:

It was really nice last year [...] we were maybe four or five euros away from my [...] 30 euro minimum. And somebody wrote, it wasn't a long post, but she wrote on there [Facebook], you know, he's got some of the best tasting vegetables I've ever had. And he's so close, and he's doing all these great things, and please can we get a couple of more people to order.

(E16 2018)

When consumers actively participate by supporting the farmers work online (e.g., comments, likes and sharing posts), it fosters a sense of community that contributes to creating an even more meaningful encounter in the shared online and in person spaces of the REKO trade. This sense of the development of a community of support is also visible in the producers to producer interactions in the REKO model. 'REKO has made my work more social. I have got to know more people and other producers in the region, which is good because the work of the farmer is generally quite lonely' (E4 2018).

The loosely defined rules of the REKO concept are what makes it possible to replicate the model in new places. Anyone interested in setting up something similar in a new place can copy the idea and start their own local REKO trade. 'Customers demand of products that are not found in supermarkets, customers awareness of fresh and healthier products, fairness for producers – no intermediaries, supporting local producers and

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diversity. We are all amazed of the uncomplicated intelligence of REKO' (A11 2015).

Through the national Facebook Groups set up for administrators and producers, newcomers can easily get help on the practicalities of setting up a new group in new places from the already established networks of experienced REKO administrators. This feature of the virtual reconnection across different geographies is also what has enabled the continued growth and replication of the REKO concept beyond its initial piloting groups in western Finland.

Facebook is available to many producers and consumers as the requirements for joining Facebook are quite minimal. However, being able to participate via Facebook does mean that one must have access to the internet. 'Communication between producers and consumer is 99% through Facebook, but we have a few customers that order directly from us by phone or e-mail' (A9 2015).

This would be the case with any digital platform and is not unique to Facebook. Facebook provides the infrastructure in a way that makes it simple for each decentralized REKO group to conform to their own local context; for example, the decision to be a public or private group. However, there are also limitations to using Facebook as the platform for the REKO group interactions and risks for disconnection brought on by these limitations – we will open these up in the next section.

Maintenance phase: Risks of disconnections

Facebook communication groups are not really designed as a sales platform, so there are spontaneous and unpredictable actions by Facebook that can interfere with sales. Facebook does not have a vested interest in the success or failure of the REKO model. This means that when Facebook is developing policy or making changes related to the use and functioning of its platform, it is not doing so with the REKO groups in mind. Thus, for its maintenance over time the REKO model is dependent on a platform that does not take its specific needs into account when making decisions or rolling out platform changes. Thus far, even when REKO administrators have got in touch with Facebook requesting changes to the platform, Facebook has not been particularly receptive (C3, discussion in REKO Sweden Admin Group, 25 April 2018). In addition, Facebook has not been engaged in trying to function in a way that directly supports the further development of the REKO model. This has been a source of frustration in online discussions in both the Finnish and Swedish national administration groups (C1 REKO Admin Finland, 20 July 2016; C4 REKO Admin Sweden, 7 June 2018).

The Facebook algorithms can be unpredictable and sometimes an algorithm will change without notice, which can affect post visibility. When comparing a REKO page on a mobile device and a computer, there are some posts that can be seen on the computer, but not on the mobile device. This becomes a problem when certain producer posts are not being seen by a portion of the group members based on how they have chosen to access the group. Additionally, the level of activity a particular consumer has on Facebook can influence what posts the algorithm makes visible in their feed (Engeseth 2020). In the same vein, Facebook will take down posts, and even close groups, if they are determined to violate its terms, even if the content might be harmless within the context of REKO. For example, Facebook does

not allow pictures of living animals to be posted in sales groups, thus if an egg producer includes a picture of live chickens in their post, it will be removed (C2 Discussion in REKO Admin Sweden, 31 December 2017).

As Facebook is not specifically designed to handle this kind of multi-user direct sales interaction, there is the potential for challenges on the producer and consumer side for keeping track of orders (Hernandez 2020). The orders are made via Facebook comment and there is no automated way to collect the information from the orders. On the producer side this means they must keep track of the comments (orders) that are made on a particular post. On the consumer side this means they must keep track of where they placed orders. The larger a group gets the more potentially complicated this gets. Thus, an order system that is based solely on Facebook comments can be difficult to administer for both producers and consumers, as a vegetable grower from western Finland noted:

I think it's a lot of work to do the orders on Facebook. I would rather have all the producers listed on the same page on an internet page that would not be connected to Facebook at all. You could have Facebook just as a marketing channel and then you would have all the producers listed there. [...] On Facebook and especially if you are on the phone, you need to scroll back and forth and then everything disappears as you have entered your order. You almost have to sit with article and pen and write what to have from what places and at what time.

(E13 2018)

The burden of keeping track of the orders and communicating availability is on the producer, so consumers do not show up to get a product that the producer no longer has available. This is not the only challenge related to using Facebook for communication. In a 2018 web-based producer survey (D 2018), many producers indicated that the transactional nature of the Facebook encounters (e.g., to the point announcements, followed by direct orders), did not give much space or time to discussion of broader food systems. This was underpinned by the short pick-up window; however, there was an overarching feeling that over the long term this ordering system did support development of a friendly rapport (Ehrnström-Fuentes et al. 2019).

Facebook has served as an effective platform for spreading the concept. However, it is quite easy to join a REKO group, and many groups currently have more members than active members (Engeseth 2020). A key challenge of the system seems to be to increase the number of participants engaged in continuously buying food and avoiding consumer dropouts over time (Lam 2020). Thus, despite the potential held by large groups of consumers and producers, when only a small number of the participants actively engage in trade, it does not really achieve the full transformative potential envisioned in the AFN literature. Thus, the virtual reconnections via Facebook alone may not foster deeper relations of trust and shared learning. However, Facebook does seem good at attracting people to join REKO and allows for loosely sustained digital relations. For example, one cattle farmer in Ostrobothnia, Finland noted how difficult it is to sell the more expensive cuts to the REKO consumers:

In the beginning we sold quite a lot but then [...]. There are so many REKO members, and they like to be part of REKO but nothing happens. They don't buy anything or they buy such small quantities. [...] People

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want to buy minced meat because they do not have the time and passion to cook food. I think that this has taken the edge out of the whole REKO idea.

(E3 2018)

The above quote shows some of the ‘promises’ from consumers (e.g., the promise to actively participate) that can accompany the start of an AFN; however, these can be difficult to fulfil over time or when a system like REKO scales-up and beyond the initial engaged consumer group. Farmers may still struggle to get a fair price for their produce, and the digital platform does not necessarily generate deep dialogues that would fundamentally transform a consumer’s perceptions of food, purchasing choices and/or cooking practices.

REKO both thrives on and suffers from conflicts, both internal to the REKO network and originating from society at large (and the conventional food system). When internal competition increases, for example when similar products are offered within a single group, online communications among producers and administrators have become heated. These tensions test the administrator’s capacity to gracefully navigate between multiple competing interests (Ehrnström-Fuentes et al. 2019). Facebook communication on conflict-laden topics (e.g., defining what kind of products should be considered ‘ethical’) tends to lead to polarizations rather than shared understandings, which has caused some producers and consumers to leave the network (Ehrnström-Fuentes and Leipämaa-Leskinen 2019). As one vegetable farmer noted:

I have noticed some conflicts when we have sold at REKO and the discussion that emerge there (on the Facebook page). We haven’t experienced this before but maybe it isn’t REKO, maybe it is just the general sentiment in the society that make people think that when they do not have to say something face-to-face they can just write anything they want.

(E14 2018)

Even considering the limitations that stem from using Facebook, REKO still remains based on the Facebook platform. The next section will highlight some of the attempts that have been made to establish a REKO-like model using other platforms.

Intermittent phase: Attempts at moving away from Facebook

There have been attempts to switch from Facebook, or at least add new digital solutions to the REKO model that are more directly aligned with local food trade. At the height of the growth of REKO in Finland (by numbers of users and new groups being founded), the founder of REKO, Thomas Snellman, was contacted frequently by both large and small IT firms who wanted to design and develop a platform that would work according to REKO needs (Snellman 2016: n.pag.). Yet, from Snellman’s side there was not much interest in developing new systems as he has always attributed the growth of REKO to Facebook and the feedback he had received from producers about the innovative move to Facebook was overwhelmingly positive (Snellman 2020: n.pag.).

Still, some notable examples are worth mentioning, although they have not thus far replaced REKO; rather, they have worked in parallel or as supportive systems. In Finland there was an attempt by vegetable producers to set up a REKO ordering system (REKOrder) that was separate from Facebook. The system was specifically designed to serve vegetable producers that have many different products to sell and needed to reduce the administrative burden of sorting out the messy orders coming through Facebook. However, updating the site in an effective and timely manner prevented the continuation of the system. In addition, there was no space for the social aspects of reconnection, which are valued in REKO. 'There has been an interest for locally, ecologically grown food among consumers for quite some time, but there hasn't simply been a connection between producer and consumer. REKO provides that link' (A12 2015).

In Sweden a system for digital trade of local food – called Local Food Nodes (LFN) – was under development. However, by the time they were ready to launch in 2017, REKO had already emerged organically in 2016 (Snellman 2017). The roll-out of REKO through Facebook happened much faster and provided the LFN developers an easily accessible group of people to introduce their tailor-made concept. Today some REKO groups and particular producers in Sweden use LFN as their ordering system. However, even though LFN is a tailor-made system that works outside of Facebook, to reach the consumers they still rely heavily on Facebook and the existing Facebook-based REKO infrastructures set up across the country.

In the capital region of Finland, there is a functioning Food Hub concept that was developed after REKO, using some of the experiences from the REKO system and moulding the concept according to the producers' needs. This Food Hub model operates largely outside of Facebook, but still interestingly uses Facebook for marketing purposes. However, unlike the REKO network it is driven by a cooperative of producers, and it relied on an influx of capital (project funding) to get up and running. The Food Hub has delivery points (refrigerated containers) where the consumers pick up their orders according to their own time schedule. This means that the Food Hub does not include a social gathering like the REKO pick-ups, which has been highlighted as an important aspect of using REKO. 'Consumers are happy and grateful to meet the producer personally. It's like reconnecting to an old model that has been the common in history' (A12 2015).

There are also several other digital 'offspring' from the REKO model. The family-run business 'Gårdsmak' in western Finland is run by farmers who initially sold their produce through REKO. They later established a digital system of direct delivery to the consumers, where they act as middlepersons for many of the producers who sell through REKO. This is a preferred system among those consumers who do not want to publicly share on Facebook group what they buy at REKO. It has also been useful for those consumers who do not have time to pick up their orders weekly at a delivery point. This new privately driven initiative shows that an AFN with low/no financial input that uses Facebook as its organizing platform can also inspire other digitalized developments of alternative food provisioning systems.

(Re-)activation phase: REKO and COVID-19

The pandemic served as a reactivation phase for REKO as it seemed that interest both in existing and new groups increased under the pandemic conditions.

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While a full analysis of the impact of COVID-19 on the REKO system is beyond the scope of this article, we will briefly highlight some of the impacts COVID-19 has had on the REKO model related to using Facebook and the impact on producer–consumer reconnection. As we did not have interview data that we directly collected during this time-period, we base our findings in this section on participant observation/observer participation, news media and academic literature.

The pandemic spurred the adoption of REKO rings in areas where the model had previously not existed, though it should be noted there were varying levels of success (Sanderson Bellamy et al. 2021). This meant that under pandemic conditions there were new REKO groups in the initiation phase which our findings showed supports a high level of producer–consumer reconnection. The rapid emergence of REKO groups in new locations during the pandemic is evidence that this type of AFN is appealing in the face of sudden disruptions in globalized food supply chains. In the United States, inspired by connections to the REKO groups in the Nordics, at least five REKO groups started in the few months following the March 2020 lockdowns (Mefferd 2020). In Australia the first REKO group was initiated by a vegetable producer that saw most of her customer base disappear when restaurants closed in March 2020, which led her to pick up on the idea of REKO that she had heard about a few months earlier. In an interview she calls the REKO system a:

COVID-19 recovery tool [...] ideal for producers of all sizes because they don't have to invest in marketing, stalls, site fees or point-of-sale equipment, they just have to know how to use Facebook and ensure their packaging is up to scratch.

(Knight 2020: n.pag.)

These geographically dispersed accounts of how REKO has rapidly emerged during 2020 through electronic word-of-mouth (Engeseth 2020) show that a shift to digital platforms does not need to be burdensome or costly, as suggested in previous research (Michel-Villarreal et al. 2021; Radcliffe et al. 2021). When the idea is simple and easy to initiate, the shift can happen through organic and spontaneous connective actions that help communities build resilience around the procurement of local food. Yet, just as with the activities within each REKO group, the digital spaces are important for the REKO model's diffusion to new geographies, it is here where people meet, spread the word and share knowledge on how to set up local systems of direct sales of food.

Another important reason that REKO was appealing to consumers and producers during the pandemic was due to the main connective interactions taking place in the digital space in a way that supported social distancing measures. As much of the direct communication between producer–consumer already happened digitally. This means the REKO model limited the in-person interactions between producers and consumers (Kumar et al. 2021a) as compared to a more traditional farmer's market, while still creating a digital space for producer–consumer interaction. In at least one location REKO pick-ups were even arranged so consumers did not have to leave their cars, yet there was still reconnection between producers and consumers through the Facebook space (Miller-Still 2021).

However, the increased popularity REKO was not only due to perceived increase in health safety via social distancing. Consumers also reported that

they want to support local producers, know where their food came from, and have direct access to high-quality food products (Naakka 2021; SVT Nyheter 2020; Warlo 2020). Media coverage from Finland, Sweden and Norway suggests that at the national level there was surge in the REKO trade right after the pandemic was announced and social distance recommendations were implemented (Heikkilä 2021; Johnsen and Christensen 2020; Kihlström 2020; Naakka 2021; *Vasabladet* 2020). In Finland, some REKO groups also reported that the number of producers selling at REKO increased twofold during the initial stages of the pandemic (Naakka 2021). Part of this uptick in producer participants was due to producers who usually primarily sold to restaurants, redirecting some of their sales to REKO (*Vasabladet* 2020). Thus, in the three countries where the REKO was an already an established concept, the intensity of trade increased because of the COVID-19 pandemic. The reconnections that occurred during this period were initiated by producers, who looked for a sales channel for goods that could not be sold at restaurants, and consumers whose interest in local food increased.

CONCLUSIONS

The aim in this article was to uncover the opportunities afforded and limitations encountered when Facebook is used a digital platform for producer–consumer reconnection in an AFN. This article questioned how REKO's use of Facebook-enabled producer–consumer reconnections, and what types of opportunities and limitations REKO encountered due to the use of Facebook. We also looked at the implications for building an AFN on an already existing platform like Facebook.

Our study showed that in the REKO model reconnections occur at many different levels and in different ways in different phases of the development of a REKO group. The growth, replication and diffusion of the REKO model since 2013 has shown that Facebook does lend itself in many ways to successfully reconnecting local actors, enabling them to get engaged in food system design. There are many opportunities available to REKO from the use of Facebook as the platform for virtual reconnections. Both consumers and producers appreciate the direct contact with each other. There are no direct fees to use the Facebook platform for the REKO trade and the threshold of technical expertise is low. There is also access to features on Facebook, like translation, which would be cost prohibitive elsewhere. Many producers and consumers are already using Facebook and if they are not the requirements to join are minimal. In addition, by its nature Facebook is set up to encourage electronic word of mouth marketing, which has been useful in adoption of the model in different locations and reconnection at the group level across geographic space. In addition to the practice-based reconnections, there are other reconnections supported by using a common platform like Facebook. For example, beyond the local producer–consumer interactions, there is also a reconnection between producers. In addition, participants have also become connected transnationally, as new REKO groups form in new spaces, partially thanks to no direct start-up costs from the platform and the simplicity of using Facebook.

Despite the opportunities, our study identified several issues related to the use of Facebook as a platform for reconnection. In fact, our findings suggest that these issues pose a considerable risk of leading to disconnections over time. First and foremost, the communication groups are not designed to be

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a sales platform. This means that there can be difficulties keeping track of orders from both the producer and consumer sides. In addition, sometimes spontaneous and unpredictable actions by Facebook can interfere with sales, for example, post visibility can be affected by the rapidly changing Facebook algorithms. While the ease of using Facebook initially attracts many people to REKO, this can also lead to inactive members and dropouts. Any potential disagreement or tensions within or between groups tend to get magnified on Facebook, for example, sharing information about more delicate topics (e.g., how the food is produced) in the Facebook groups may result in conflicts and hurt feelings. Finally, because there is no formal cooperation between Facebook and REKO, there is always the possibility that Facebook will alter the features or set-up without warning in a way that will affect the ability to use the REKO groups as currently designed.

In the REKO model virtual reconnections are forged between producers and consumers using the Facebook group. However, the space for deep exchanges is limited, which does limit some of the transformation promise espoused by AFN scholars (Rossi et al. 2019; Kneafsey et al. 2008; Dowler et al. 2009). However, over time in the REKO model there is still evidence of the development of a rapport between producers and consumers. Producers get to learn their market and the consumers get to know who is producing their food. This supports one of the goals of an AFN – reconnection of the producer and the consumer. To some extent there is an articulated moral desire to support the development of a more sustainable and grounded food system, but there are still limits to what can be achieved in a market-based system like REKO. In some cases, producers and consumer participate for economic or other motivations. However, the base motivation does not change the space for direct connection between producer and consumer.

One of the most important directions for future research is tackling some of the more difficult issues that come with digital territory, for example the environmental costs that come with digital platforms, both in relation to the physical infrastructure needed to support digital spaces and issues related to the environmental costs of the infrastructures required to make these virtual reconnections (Chagnon et al. 2021). There are also potential negative social repercussions from engagement with Facebook and other social media spaces that need to be further researched in the context of digital spaces of producer–consumer reconnection. The intensified processes of polarization and politicization of social media platforms, including Facebook, adds another element of concern for an AFN that depends on their widespread use for its own survival. Can REKO survive if Facebook is suddenly no longer the preferred choice for digital communication among its community members? Or what if younger generations would prefer to use platforms other than Facebook for their virtual encounters? These are important questions that deserve attention in future research.

In addition, there is still ample room for further research into the REKO model and how it functions as both a digitally and in-person AFN, both in local groups and as a translocal network. As this is a relatively new AFN compared to farmer's markets or even the CSA model, we expect that the next few years will bring much more research attention to the REKO phenomenon. It will be interesting to see how the REKO community continues to engage in novel innovations, adapting to emerging societal circumstances, and novel institutional contexts as it moves further from its founding context in Finland.

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CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Sophia E. Hagolani-Albov, M.Sc., is a doctoral researcher in the Doctoral Programme in Interdisciplinary Environmental Sciences (DENVI) in the Faculty of Agriculture and Forestry at the University of Helsinki in Finland. She is affiliated with the Helsinki Institute of Sustainability Science (HELSUS) and the Global Extractivisms and Alternatives Initiative (EXALT). Her research is rooted in sustainable food systems, specifically the concept of agroecological symbiosis (AES) and the localization of food production, processing and consumption in the Finnish countryside.

Contact: Faculty of Agricultural and Forestry, University of Helsinki, Latokartanonkaari 7, P.O. Box 27, 00014 Helsinki, Finland.

E-mail: Sophia.hagolani-albov@helsinki.fi

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0958-524X>

Maria Ehrnström-Fuentes, Ph.D., is an assistant professor at the Department of Management and Organization at Hanken School of Economics in Finland. Her research focuses on the interaction of people, places and nonhuman beings involved in the organizing of sustainability in the local sphere. She has an extensive record of critically examining the politics of corporate social responsibility (CSR) in natural resource-based industries, and Indigenous ways of knowing and organizing around issues of sustaining land-based practices.

Contact: Department of Management and Organization, Hanken School of Economics, Kirjastonkatu 16, P.O. Box 287, 65101 Vaasa, Finland.

E-mail: maria.ehrnstrom-fuentes@hanken.fi

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3030-2328>

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