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Florida strawberry producers have faced increased competition and difficulties marketing their products over recent years. The purpose of this study was to explore eastern United States consumers' purchasing intent of Florida strawberries to develop communication and marketing strategies for Florida strawberries in a competitive market. The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) guided the research, and focus groups were conducted in North Carolina, Tennessee, Ohio, Massachusetts, and New York. Participants had positive attitudes toward purchasing Florida strawberries, and past experiences and interactions with others influenced their purchasing intent, but their perceptions of behavioral control were low. Participants with neutral attitudes and limited behavioral control had lower intent to purchase Florida strawberries in the future compared to other participants. Extension could help producers increase purchasing intent by increasing perceived behavioral control, making the growing location easily visible on the strawberry labels, and facilitating personal experiences between consumers and the product.

Keywords: local food, strawberries, theory of planned behavior, purchasing intent, marketing

Introduction & Theoretical Framework

Consumers have indicated a preference for local food, and the demand for locally grown produce has increased during the past decade (Becot, Conner, Nelson, Buckwalter, & Erickson, 2014; Jefferson-Moore, Robbins, Johnson, & Bradford, 2014). Not only are locally produced food products viewed as healthy and safe, but they also appeal to consumers' emotions (Keeling-Bond, Thilmany, & Bond, 2009; Onozaka, Nurse, & McFadden, 2010). Many states in the United States (US) have pursued branding of state agricultural products to promote locally grown products in out-of-state markets (Onken & Bernard, 2010). Typically, consumers prefer to purchase food grown as close as possible to where they live (Rumble & Roper, 2014), which is a form of regional ethnocentrism (Siemieniako, Kubacki, Glinska, & Krot, 2011). Ethnocentrism reflects consumers' moral concerns with purchasing food from outside of their region and the economic impact it would have (Shimp & Sharma, 1987). However, consumers

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in urban areas do not always have access to local foods at farmers markets and find shopping at grocery stores to be more convenient (Penney & Prior, 2014). Regardless of their preference, consumers do not always have the option to purchase food from their region depending on the growing season of commodities in the area (Becot et al., 2014; Jefferson-Moore et al., 2014).

While there are a number of commodities that could be used to explore purchasing intent for domestically produced products, this study focused on strawberries. Strawberries are not grown year-round in every region, which limits the availability of local, state-grown strawberries to consumers in different regions. Strawberry growers, like many other farmers, have to ship their products across state lines and sell to consumers in regions outside their own (Stark, 2016). Additionally, domestically grown strawberries have been faced with increasing competition from cheaper, Mexico strawberries (U.S. Department of Agriculture-Economic Research Service [USDA-ERS], 2013; Wu, Guan, & Whidden, 2012). Understanding consumers' purchasing intent and perceptions of local food grown in America, but in a different state, will be important to the success of farmers who are having to sell produce in an increasingly competitive market.

The majority of strawberries sold in the US are shipped from California, which produced over two billion pounds of strawberries in 2012 (USDA-ERS, 2013). Florida's strawberry industry contributes to 13% of the US value of strawberries (Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services [FDACS], 2017), but it is the second largest crop in market value in Florida (USDA-National Agricultural Statistics Service [NASS], 2017). The Florida strawberry industry has contributed approximately \$300 million to the state's economy each year (FDACS, 2013). Additionally, Florida is the top domestic producer of strawberries during the winter months when other areas are too cold to grow the fruit (Agricultural Marketing Resource Center, 2018) and ships approximately 70% of its strawberries to states east of the Mississippi River (Stark, 2016; S. Harrell, personal communication, January 24, 2015). The influx of Mexico strawberries occurs during winter months (USDA-ERS, 2013; Wu et al., 2012), which has caused Florida's market share of strawberries to decrease (Bareuther, 2016). During the winter season, consumers have the limited option of purchasing Florida strawberries or international strawberries.

Floridians have agreed they would prefer to purchase Florida-grown strawberries labeled Fresh from Florida (Ruth & Rumble, 2016; Ruth, Rumble, & Settle, 2016). However, Floridians have not been aware of the strawberry growing season in Florida, which has made it difficult to market the fruit (Ruth et al., 2016). If consumers within the state that produces the strawberries do not recognize the growing season, out-of-state consumers cannot be expected to know when Florida strawberries would be available to purchase. Regional and geographical influences on local food preferences could affect consumers' preferences for Florida strawberries (Aprile, Caputo, & Nayga, 2016). Because strawberry products hold little differences amongst them, Extension could help the strawberry industry determine ways to better promote Florida strawberries in a more competitive market to an audience who may not be aware the product is even available.

There is a need to explore the awareness and perceptions of Florida's strawberry season in states where the strawberries are distributed. Exploring consumer ethnocentrism at a regional level (Fernández-Ferrín & Bande-Vilela, 2013) will help producers and distributors create brand awareness and increase demand for the product when it is in season. Previous research has recommended producers use simple and visible marketing strategies that target the emotional and cultural needs of consumers (Aprile et al., 2016; Lombardi, Migliore, Verneau, Schifani, & Cemblo, 2015). Additionally, Extension could aid producers and distributors in the adoption of these strategies to help promote locally grown food (Knight & Chopra, 2013). In this study, we will explore regional consumers' intent to buy Florida strawberries in order to understand consumers' purchasing intent and preferences related to domestically-grown food. While not every state in the country produces strawberries, they will produce commodities that are sold in other regional markets. The findings from this study can provide insight into how Extension can best help producers and distributors promote state-grown products across state lines.

Theory of Planned Behavior

The theory of planned behavior (TPB) guided this study (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980) and can be used to predict behavior (Warner & Schall, 2015). According to Ajzen (2011), subjective norms, attitude toward a behavior, and perceived control of the behavior all predict behavioral intent. Within TPB, subjective norms describe the influence of an individual's surroundings on his/her intention or behavior. Another factor in the TPB is the attitude toward the behavior. Perloff (2013) defined attitude as the "learned global evaluation of an object (person, place, or issue) that influences thought and action" (p. 71). Ajzen and Fishbein (1980) described the attitude toward a behavior as how favorable or unfavorable a person felt toward a behavior. Research has concluded attitudes that are more favorable indicated a greater likelihood for a behavior to be performed. The final factor of the TPB influencing intention is perceived control of the behavior. An individual must perceive the behavior as something he/she can accomplish for intention to be established (Ajzen, 1988).

Researchers have used the TPB to guide several different studies related to agriculture and food production (Aertsens, Verbeke, Mondelaers, & Huylenbroek, 2009; Holt, 2014; Lorenz, Hartmann, & Simons, 2015; Rainbolt, Onozaka, & McFadden, 2012). Aertsens et al. (2009) and Holt (2014) both found that the three TPB variables predicted intent to purchase organic and local food respectively. Aertsens et al. (2009) also determined moral or personal norms influenced consumption. Moral norms reflect an individual's belief that he or she is acting in a manner that is either right or wrong (Schwartz, 1973). Similarly, Lorenz et al. (2015) and Rainbolt et al. (2012) determined that the TPB could be used to predict the purchase of local food products and that the addition of personal norms strengthened the overall model, but behavioral control and social norms were the strongest predictors (Rainbolt et al., 2012). Holt (2014) also concluded that respondents' prior experience with purchasing local food was predictive of their intent to purchase locally in the future.

Purpose & Objectives

The purpose of this study was to explore eastern US consumers' purchasing intent of Florida strawberries. The research question that guided this study was:

How do eastern US consumers' attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control influence their intent to purchase Florida strawberries?

Methods

Qualitative methodology is often used in research when an issue requires exploration and detailed insight into a problem (Creswell, 2013). Focus groups were used to fulfill the purpose of this research because there was a limited understanding of how eastern US consumers perceived Florida strawberries (Powell, Single, & Lloyd, 1996). Focus groups have been a useful tool to allow participants to discuss ideas in a group setting (Morgan, 1998). A disadvantage of focus groups is the phenomenon of groupthink, where everyone agrees, and the minority opinion is not expressed, which can bias the results (Morgan, 1998). Another issue with qualitative research is that the findings are not generalizable to the population of interest (Robinson, 1999), but this study was more interested in gathering deeper insight into eastern US consumers' purchasing intent of Florida strawberries than in generalizing the results.

The population of interest was eastern US strawberry consumers (east of the Mississippi River), and participants from the study were selected from five purposively selected states. These states represented five different geographic regions where Florida strawberries were shipped for sale (New England, Middle Atlantic, South Atlantic, East South Central, and East North Central; S. Harrell, personal communication, January 24, 2015). Focus groups were conducted in Charlotte, North Carolina; Nashville, Tennessee; Columbus, Ohio; New York (Brooklyn), New York; and Boston, Massachusetts in March and April of 2015. These specific locations were chosen due to the cities' large population size and the research teams' access to facilities to host the focus groups. A third-party marketing company recruited the participants via phone. The marketing company bought a marketing list of names and contact information for each focus group location. Potential participants were randomly selected from the marketing lists and contacted for recruitment and screening. All participants had to answer "yes" to a filter question asking if they had purchased fresh strawberries in the past 12 months. Upon completion of the focus groups, the participants were compensated with \$70. Participants did not necessarily live in the cities of the focus groups and may have traveled from nearby towns or suburbs. The focus groups in Nashville and Charlotte were completed in March, which was close to the peak of Florida's strawberry season. Two focus groups were conducted in each state (10 total). A pseudonym was assigned to each participant for anonymity in the reporting of the results.

A description of the focus group locations has been provided to add understanding to the context of the research and help with the transferability of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). All the

states' strawberry seasons were in May and June, which is outside of Florida's growing season (North Carolina Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, 2015; Our Ohio, 2015; Pick Tennessee Products, 2013; Pick your Own, 2015a, 2015b). Charlotte, North Carolina, has a population over one million people, and Nashville, Tennessee, is home to over 900,000 residents. Columbus, Ohio, has over one million residents, while New York, New York, had the largest population with over 12 million people living in the area. The final city was Boston, Massachusetts, which has a population of over four million (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). As described by Gallup (2014), North Carolina and Tennessee residents have conservative political ideologies (38.9% and 43.2% respectively), while residents in Ohio, New York, and Massachusetts have moderate political ideologies (37.3%, 35.8%, and 38.1%). Research has also found that more chain food stores are located outside of inner-cities (Chung & Myers, 1999); New York has typically had few supermarkets, but a variety of bodegas (Gordon et al., 2011).

Each focus group consisted of four to ten participants, with an average of eight participants per group. Kreuger and Casey (2015) recommended that focus groups use six to twelve participants; however, Greenbaum (2000) found that there were no significant differences in focus groups if only four to six participants were present. There were 75 total participants ($n = 75$) in this study. The majority were white, female, and earned an annual income of less than \$75,000. More than half were between the ages of 45 and 64. Approximately one-third of the participants reported their political ideology as moderate. There were 16 participants in Charlotte, 17 in Nashville, 16 in Columbus, 12 in Brooklyn, and 14 in Boston (there were two focus groups in each state). A full description of participants in each state can be seen in Table 1 (some participants elected not to answer all demographic questions).

Table 1. Description of Respondents

Characteristics	NC ^b ($n = 16$) % (n)	TN ^c ($n = 17$) % (n)	OH ^d ($n = 16$) % (n)	NY ^e ($n = 12$) % (n)	MA ^f ($n = 14$) % (n)	Total ($n = 75$) % (n)
Sex ($n = 74$)						
Male	37.5 (6)	41.2 (7)	56.3 (9)	27.3 (3)	35.7 (5)	40.5 (30)
Female	62.5 (10)	58.8 (10)	43.8 (7)	72.7 (8)	64.3 (9)	59.6 (44)
Ethnicity ($n = 75$)						
Hispanic	0 (0)	0 (0)	6.3 (1)	0 (0)	7.1 (1)	2.7 (2)
Race ($n = 76$) ^a						
American Indian/Alaska Native	0 (0)	10.5 (2)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	2.7 (2)
African American	43.8 (7)	15.8 (3)	25.0 (4)	66.7 (8)	7.1 (1)	28.9 (22)
Asian or Pacific Islander	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	14.3 (2)	2.6 (2)
White	56.3 (9)	73.7 (14)	62.5 (10)	25.0 (3)	71.4 (10)	60.5 (46)
Other	0 (0)	0 (0)	12.5 (2)	8.3 (1)	7.1 (1)	5.3 (4)

Characteristics	NC ^b	TN ^c	OH ^d	NY ^e	MA ^f	Total
	(<i>n</i> = 16) % (<i>n</i>)	(<i>n</i> = 17) % (<i>n</i>)	(<i>n</i> = 16) % (<i>n</i>)	(<i>n</i> = 12) % (<i>n</i>)	(<i>n</i> = 14) % (<i>n</i>)	(<i>n</i> = 75) % (<i>n</i>)
Income (<i>n</i> = 71)						
Less than \$25,000	6.7 (1)	5.9 (1)	13.3 (2)	0 (0)	38.5 (5)	12.7 (9)
\$25,000-\$49,999	26.7 (4)	41.2 (7)	26.7 (4)	27.3 (3)	15.4 (2)	28.2 (20)
\$50,000-\$74,999	33.3 (5)	23.5 (4)	13.3 (2)	36.4 (4)	23.1 (3)	25.6 (18)
\$75,000-\$149,999	20.0 (3)	17.6 (3)	46.7 (7)	27.3 (3)	15.4 (2)	25.6 (18)
\$150,000-\$249,999	0 (0)	11.8 (2)	0 (0)	9.1 (1)	7.7 (1)	5.6 (4)
\$250,000 or more	13.3 (2)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	2.8 (2)
Age (<i>n</i> = 73)						
18-24	0 (0)	0 (0)	6.3 (1)	9.1 (1)	0 (0)	2.7 (2)
25-34	12.5 (2)	6.3 (1)	12.5 (2)	18.2 (2)	0 (0)	9.6 (7)
35-44	31.3 (5)	6.3 (1)	25.0 (4)	18.2 (2)	7.1 (1)	17.8 (13)
45-54	31.3 (5)	43.8 (7)	25.0 (4)	9.1 (1)	21.4 (3)	27.3 (20)
55-64	12.5 (2)	37.5 (6)	25.0 (4)	27.3 (3)	50.0 (7)	30.1 (22)
65-74	6.3 (1)	6.3 (1)	6.3 (1)	18.2 (2)	14.3 (2)	9.6 (7)
75 and older	6.3 (1)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	7.1 (1)	2.7 (2)
Political Ideology (<i>n</i> = 73)						
Very Liberal	0 (0)	23.5 (4)	0 (0)	0 (0)	14.3 (2)	8.2 (6)
Liberal	31.3 (5)	11.8 (2)	18.8 (3)	50.0 (5)	21.4 (3)	24.7 (18)
Moderate	25.0 (4)	23.5 (4)	37.5 (6)	30.0 (3)	42.9 (6)	31.5 (23)
Conservative	31.3 (5)	29.4 (5)	31.3 (5)	20.0 (2)	21.4 (3)	27.4 (20)
Very Conservative	12.5 (2)	11.8 (2)	12.5 (2)	0 (0)	0 (0)	8.2 (6)

^a Respondents could select more than one answer.

^b Percentages for income in North Carolina based on 15 responses.

^c Percentages for age in Tennessee based on 16 responses.

^d Percentages for income in Ohio based on 15 responses.

^e Percentages for age, gender, and income in New York based on 11 responses; Percentages for political ideology based on 10 responses.

^f Percentages for income in Massachusetts based on 13 responses.

Before the focus groups were conducted, a panel of experts reviewed the moderator's guide for validity. The panel consisted of two faculty members from the University of Florida and two strawberry industry professionals. The moderator's guide was semistructured and started with broad questions about where the participants purchased strawberries, how often they purchased strawberries, and how they selected strawberries for purchase. Subsequent questions asked about the participants' perceptions of Florida strawberries, California strawberries, and strawberries grown in Mexico. Participants were also prompted to answer questions specifically about their preferences related to taste, appearance, social interactions, supporting local farmers, and growing location when purchasing strawberries.

Environmental triangulation was used to maximize the findings in the study by replicating the focus groups in five different states (Guion, 2002). Researchers use this type of triangulation to determine if findings remain the same in different environmental conditions. The various locations of the focus groups and the fact that not all of the focus groups were conducted during the peak of Florida's strawberry season could have influenced the results of this study (Guion, 2002). Additionally, the researchers used member checking to establish the credibility of the research by reading a summary of the discussion back to the participants upon the conclusion of the focus groups and confirming that the conclusions were accurate.

All of the focus groups were recorded with two audio recording devices and by a note taker who took observational notes throughout the conversations. The recordings were transcribed with the aid of the notes to add clarity to the transcriptions. Thick, rich descriptions of the findings are provided with the results to aid in the transferability of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Quotes from participants were edited for grammar to help increase the readability of the manuscript. Researchers utilized the computer software, MAXQDA 2015 (VERBI Software, 2014) for data analysis, to analyze the data. This software helps the researchers keep track of the assigned codes for analysis and quickly retrieve examples for each assigned code. Data were evaluated using *a priori* coding and guided by the TPB. This type of coding is used when a research question is focused and heavily guided by theory (Kuzel, 1999). Attitudes toward purchasing Florida strawberries, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control of purchasing Florida strawberries were coded along with purchasing intent. The computer software served as an audit trail to detail how the data were coded throughout the data analysis process, and peer debriefing was utilized as an external check for the interpretations of the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Researcher bias was identified to aid the reader in understanding the researchers' position and how it may have influenced the implications made from the study (Merriam, 1988). The primary investigator and graduate assistant for the research had already completed a similar study the prior year with the population confined to Floridians only. Additionally, the graduate student working on the paper was born and raised in Florida but had no connections to the strawberry industry. Both researchers lived in Florida at the time of the study and had an interest in promoting locally produced agricultural products.

Results

Attitude Toward Behavior

Attitude toward purchasing Florida strawberries emerged during the focus groups as participants discussed what influenced their selection decisions of strawberries. When asked about the barriers and benefits of purchasing Florida strawberries, many of the participants described the freshness and taste of the strawberries to be important. When Annie of Charlotte was asked if she would consider purchasing Florida strawberries, she replied, "I would feel like Florida

strawberries were fresher, and I guess they are. If you have other strawberries to compare with, they probably would have a better taste.” Maggie from Boston had a similar attitude and explained, “The ones from Florida seem to be sweeter.” Byron from Nashville also described how “the color of Florida strawberries are more vibrant [than California].”

Participants also discussed how the strawberries from Florida would not have to travel as far to their geographic area, which could also reduce the cost. John from Columbus explained,

I feel like it would be a smart idea for stores to sell Florida strawberries. I figure if they are getting them from California or from Mexico . . . the cost of moving them would be a lot more than just from Florida.

As the conversations moved to discuss the importance of how far the strawberries travel, Allen of Brooklyn said, “[Florida strawberries] are going to be fresher because they are closer and they can drive them up in a day and a half.” The participants appeared to associate the idea that the distance the strawberries traveled to their grocery stores was connected to the freshness and taste of the fruit.

However, not all of the participants expressed strong attitudes or preference toward Florida strawberries. Some participants in Brooklyn were unsure about the benefits or barriers to purchasing strawberries grown in Florida. When asked about purchasing Florida strawberries, Meredith said, “I do not have a feeling about Florida strawberries.” Anita added, “Other than distance, I cannot think of any other benefits. Only because I have not really noticed where [strawberries] come from.” Similarly, in Boston, Olivia said, “I do not see any benefit to purchasing Florida strawberries.” The rest of the participants in the focus group indicated agreement but did not list any barriers to purchasing Florida strawberries either.

Subjective Norms

As participants described their purchasing habits and preferences for strawberries, many discussed how social influences and interactions affected their intent to purchase strawberries. These conversations were coded under subjective norms. When asked why she might purchase Florida strawberries compared to those from California or Mexico, Meredith of Brooklyn said she would purchase them out of “loyalty to the east coast.” Many of the participants echoed this sentiment and agreed that a sense of loyalty drove their preference for Florida strawberries.

Participants also discussed how conversations with their friends and family who had positive experiences with Florida strawberries increased their intent to purchase them. Jane from Columbus explained,

I do have a coworker who just recently moved here from Florida, and I mentioned something about coming to the focus group tonight, and she said oh, ‘I hope they give

you Florida strawberries to taste because [they are] really good.’ So, I have heard really good things about Florida strawberries. . . . If I saw them, I would probably buy them.

Participants also brought up how their own experiences with Florida strawberries were influencing their purchasing decisions. Frederick of Boston explained that he had been going to Florida for a number of years to visit family and they would pick Florida strawberries together so he “would just buy them for sentimental reasons.” As participants like Frederick and Jane described their own or others’ experiences with Florida strawberries, the other participants in the focus group expressed that their attitudes were changing and they were more interested in purchasing Florida strawberries compared to before the focus group. In Boston, Sylvia said, “I am learning a lot tonight.” Andy replied, “I never knew so much about strawberries,” and Sylvia expressed that she was going to “go to the store now” to see if they were carrying Florida strawberries. Similarly, in Brooklyn, Shauna said,

This discussion has been very informative because I have never paid attention to where strawberries are grown. I just know that I can go to the store and buy strawberries. . . . Now I will pay attention to where my strawberries are sourced from.

Other evidence of subjective norms emerged during conversations comparing California or Mexico to Florida strawberries. Current issues in California, like politics and the environment, were identified as reasons to purchase Florida strawberries. Kayla of Boston said, “I have kind of a bias against California, so that would be my reason for not purchasing from there. I think their governance is out of control.” Edward agreed and said, “Right now with the problems they are having in California with the drought. . . . I would pick Florida over California.” Labor regulations and farmworker welfare were reasons discussed for why participants would prefer not to purchase strawberries from Mexico. In Columbus, Tiffany said, “I think of the workers in Mexico being paid five cents an hour, and that factors into my decision [for purchasing strawberries]. I [am] starting to be more political on it.” Lilly from Boston had similar concerns for farm workers and explained that if Florida strawberry growers “could identify the ways in which workers were supported and the ways that farmers were paid for the strawberries,” she would be more willing to purchase them.

Perceived Behavioral Control

Participants were also asked if they felt like they had any control over whether or not they could purchase Florida strawberries in their state to understand their perceived behavioral control. Participants expressed concern about Florida strawberries being available for purchase in their local area. In Boston, Maggie said, “You can only buy what the store has.” Similarly, in Nashville, Mark said, “Florida strawberries are not always available.” Erik in Charlotte also explained, “[You are] at the mercy of the store. . . . If Florida strawberries are not there, they are not there.”

Participants also brought up experiences in stores where they did not have the option to choose Florida strawberries, or the packages were not clearly labeled with the growing location. Thomas of Boston said, “When I go to the store, there are only strawberries. The label does not say from Mexico or Florida or California.” In Charlotte, Angelica said, “In some instances, you may just have a choice of California or none. Or you may have the choice of Florida or none.” Overall, participants’ descriptions indicated limited behavioral control over purchasing Florida strawberries due to the availability in the stores.

Some participants did indicate they could find the growing location on strawberry packages, which helped increase their perceptions of behavioral control for purchasing Florida strawberries. Megan of Nashville said, “The location is marked on the packages. I know when I am buying Florida strawberries. They are available right now when locally grown ones are not, and that is my motivation for buying them.” A few participants even indicated they would ask their stores to carry Florida strawberries so they could purchase them. Jackie of Columbus explained, “You can request certain items to be carried in a store. I know that most of the grocery stores will try to accommodate you if they get enough requests for things.” Andy agreed and said that sometimes “it comes down to the customers being willing to say, ‘Hey, I would like this. I know it is available, why don’t you have it?’ Store workers will listen and take note and then take it to their superiors.”

Purchasing Intent

As the focus groups progressed, participants were asked how different strawberry characteristics influenced their purchasing intent as well as their intent to purchase Florida strawberries over domestic and international alternatives. After being informed of Florida’s growing season, the majority of participants indicated they would look for Florida strawberries during the winter growing season over Mexico strawberries. In Brooklyn, Chris explained, “It seems to me that we associate Florida with freshness, and I would definitely buy strawberries from Florida.” Anita agreed and said, “I would definitely buy strawberries from Florida.” In Columbus, Carl said, “All things being equal, I would buy Florida strawberries.”

Other participants brought up attributes in addition to growing location for when deciding what strawberries to purchase. Ken of Nashville said, “I would certainly buy Florida strawberries over anything from Mexico or Guatemala or wherever. If I had a choice between California and Florida, it would probably come down to cost and the appearance of the product.”

Tiffany of Columbus had a similar opinion,

If I am given two packages and they are both American grown, one in California, one in Florida, and the prices are comparable, all bets are off because I am looking at the color of the berries, the firmness of the berries, the freshness of the berries.

Participants also indicated they preferred Florida strawberries over imported ones. In Nashville, Charlie said, “If you are standing there and one strawberry package says made in Mexico, and the other one says Florida, you are naturally going to take Florida.” Vinnie of Columbus expressed similar thoughts and said that because Florida strawberries would not be “crossing any borders,” he would prefer to purchase them.

However, not all participants expressed this strong intent to purchase Florida strawberries. In Boston, Thomas said, “It does not really matter where [strawberries] are from. I buy them on impulse and get them on sale. I couldn’t tell you the difference between California strawberries and Florida strawberries.” Olivia agreed and said, “I buy strawberries on a whim. If it came from Florida, it is okay. If it came from California, it is okay. If it came from Mexico, it is okay.” The rest of the participants in Boston shared the sentiment that they would not actively seek Florida strawberries or pay attention to the growing locations.

Discussion and Implications

There is a need to understand consumers’ ethnocentrism at a regional level and understand their intent to purchase produce grown out-of-state (Fernández-Ferrín & Bande-Vilela, 2013). Due to the recent rise in competition from imported strawberries and their sales in out-of-state markets (USDA-ERS, 2013; Wu et al., 2012), this study specifically explored eastern US consumers’ perceptions and purchasing intent of Florida strawberries. The qualitative findings from this study cannot be generalized to the population; however, they can provide necessary insight into understanding consumers’ purchasing intent of Florida strawberries. A detailed description of the focus group locations, the participants, and the Florida strawberry industry have been provided to aid in the transferability of the implications and recommendations to other commodities and regions where appropriate (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The majority of participants described positive attitudes toward Florida strawberries related to freshness and taste, which was consistent with prior research (Ruth & Rumble, 2016; Ruth et al., 2016). Participants agreed their preference for Florida strawberries was related to the relatively shorter distance the product had to travel compared to competitors. Purchasing intent reflected the participants’ positive attitudes, and many participants used Florida strawberry qualities to justify their intent to purchase in the future.

Some participants did have a difficult time identifying positive attributes of Florida strawberries, and the same participants did not describe a strong purchasing intent. The focus groups were conducted in urban locations, and some participants may not have been knowledgeable about agriculture. Additionally, farmers markets may not be as accessible to participants who lived in urban locations compared to participants who lived in suburban areas (Penney & Prior, 2014), which may account for the varying levels in attitudes and experiences with Florida strawberries. Another reason for the differences in attitudes (and other characteristics from TPB) could be due to one or a few vocal participants sharing an opinion that does not necessarily reflect the

consensus. Additionally, focus groups in Boston and Brooklyn were conducted at the end of strawberry season, while the rest were conducted during the height of the season. The difference in timing may have influenced the participants' familiarity with Florida-grown strawberries at the time. Regardless of attitude being positive or negative, there did appear to be an association with purchasing intent as described by the TPB (Ajzen, 1988).

Subjective norms also appeared to influence the intent to purchase (Rainbolt et al., 2012). A number of participants indicated that hearing about how great Florida strawberries were from their peers increased their likelihood to look for the product in stores. Additionally, participants with positive prior experiences with Florida strawberries agreed they were likely to purchase in the future, which was consistent with prior research (Holt, 2014). These participants said that the strawberries brought back happy memories, and they would purchase them for that feeling. Some participants discussed political and economic reasons they would purchase Florida strawberries compared to those from California or Mexico. The participants were also concerned for the welfare of the strawberry workers both in Mexico and in Florida. The presence of subjective political norms in some of the focus groups could be the result of cultural and political differences between the states. These attitudes may also be more reflective of moral or personal norms, rather than subjective norms (Aertsens et al., 2009).

Participants expressed a spectrum of attitudes toward behavioral control for purchasing Florida strawberries. Some participants felt they had limited control over whether or not they could purchase Florida strawberries. Many said they had no control over whether their stores would sell them or if the growing location would be available/visible on the label. Because perceived behavioral control is directly related to intent to purchase (Ajzen, 1988; Rainbolt et al., 2012), participants with this perception of behavioral control would likely have a weak purchasing intent for Florida strawberries. Evidence of this weak purchasing intent was demonstrated when participants described how they would purchase strawberries just based on prices. However, some participants explained they would ask their grocery stores to sell Florida strawberries, exhibiting high behavior control.

Even though some participants said they would not care where their strawberries were grown, the majority of participants agreed they would look for Florida strawberries while shopping. Yet attributes aside from growing location would also influence participants' purchasing decisions. The bottom line of price came up several times as did taste and freshness. Other participants indicated they would always buy Florida strawberries over those imported from another country; however, this attitude was not consistent when compared to other domestic strawberries. Consumer ethnocentrism was apparent, but it seemed to be more important at a national level rather than regional level because the participants did not differentiate preferences between domestic strawberries (Shimp & Sharma, 1987).

Recommendations

The majority of states have to export their food products to other locations and develop effective strategies to promote and market their products outside of their local markets. While the findings of this study are specific to Florida strawberries and cannot be generalized, the recommendations could hold value to other states and commodities that have to market outside their state.

Personal experiences have been shown in prior literature, and this research, to have a positive impact on purchasing intent (Holt, 2014). Extension personnel should work with local strawberry growers and distributors to develop messages and educational programs to promote Florida strawberries and other locally grown produce, particularly in urban locations. In addition, promoting Florida strawberries at state fairs, community events, and in grocery stores through taste tests and cooking demonstrations could increase positive attitudes toward purchasing Florida strawberries. The personal interactions and experiences with growers and the products could increase perceived behavioral control and perceptions of social norms if consumers experience Florida strawberries in their local areas, which would increase consumers' purchasing intent (Ajzen, 1988; Rainbolt et al., 2012). Extension personnel should also consider these recommendations when assisting producers in marketing other commodities across state lines.

Not all of the participants were able to identify specific attributes about Florida strawberries. These neutral attitudes were associated with weak purchasing intent, which indicated a need to develop communication material targeting attitudes to increase Florida strawberry sales. Social media, television, newspaper, magazine advertisements, and transportation advertisements (e.g., subway ads, bus ads, and billboards) that focus on the positive attributes of Florida strawberries, like availability in winter months, could help increase positive perceptions of the product, particularly when the product is in season.

Subjective norms should also be considered when developing communication to promote Florida strawberries (Rainbolt et al., 2012). Using spokespersons to share personal testimonies of their experiences about Florida strawberries and hosting events at community centers could help increase positive perceptions of subjective norms related to Florida strawberries and reinforce the cultural and emotional needs of the consumer (Aprile et al., 2016; Lombardi et al., 2015). Communication campaigns that focus on the fair treatment of farm workers could reinforce consumers' moral norms, which would increase their purchasing intent as well (Aertsens et al., 2009).

While the findings from this study provide insight into consumers' purchasing intent of Florida strawberries, they also reveal potential ways Extension can help producers increase perceptions of behavioral control in out-of-state markets. Including the growing location on the package in an easy-to-see design or using a state agricultural brand, like Fresh from Florida, are a few ways to increase perceived behavioral control of where strawberries are grown for consumers in the

store. Northern states may not be as familiar with the logo; however, inclusion of the growing location or state brand could signal consumers to consider the product origin while shopping, which would increase perceptions of behavioral control (Aprile et al., 2016; Lorenz et al., 2015). Because some participants said they would even ask their stores to carry Florida-grown strawberries, communication for the products could include a call-to-action for consumers to do this. Addressing consumers' attitudes, subjective norms, and behavioral control through communication efforts could lead to increased intent to purchase Florida strawberries, or other commodities sold across state lines, in the future (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980).

Future research should use a random sample survey of eastern US strawberry consumers to determine if these findings were reflective of the population. Additionally, this study measured stated preferences for strawberry purchases, which do not always align with revealed preferences. Researchers could address this limitation by collecting data at the point of purchase to gather their revealed, or actual, preference. Message frames should be tested to determine if they will have different influences depending on location or audience demographics. Based on the findings from this study, frames that should be explored include personal messages (subjective norms), availability of the season (perceived behavioral control), and freshness (attitude toward the behavior). This research could also be replicated with other state commodities, both in Florida and in other areas.

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