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Consumer Embeddedness and Motivations for Farmers Market Patronage: A Qualitative Exploration in Minnesota, USA

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The rise in popularity of farmers markets in the United States reflects consumers' negative response to more traditional food distribution systems. Farmers markets provide consumers with a more local and often more personal food purchasing experience. The purpose of this study was to examine consumer motivations to patronize farmers markets through the lens of social, spatial, and natural embeddedness. A qualitative approach was employed utilizing semi-structured, in-depth interviews. These interviews were conducted in person using a set of predetermined questions and revealed nine themes. The findings indicate that two types of consumer choices with different properties exist in farmers market patronage (e.g., the choice of a particular farmers market vs. the choice of a particular vendor at the market). Inconsistency occurs in consumer choice patterns (e.g., economic saving does not greatly affect the choice to shop at a particular farmers market but can determine whom to buy from once at the market), implying that situational dynamics play a critical role at the point of purchase. While this study supports the usefulness of embeddedness as a conceptual framework for understanding farmers' market patronage, it demonstrates a distinction between motivation to patronize the market and shopping behaviors exhibited once there.

Keywords: Retail patronage, farmers market, embeddedness

Introduction

Since Watts and Goodman's notable work was published in 1997, the agricultural system has undergone rapid changes over the past decades. Food production and consumption have been tailored to local tastes, and even major food corporations have been forced to adapt to local preferences and circumstances (Skallerud & Wien, 2019). Interestingly, consumers' need for market specialty has allowed smaller producers to challenge the global food complex through alternative retail systems (Spielmann & Bernelin, 2015). An emphasis on health and food safety, the environmental impact of industrial food systems, animal welfare, and workers' rights are all related issues (Nguyen, 2018), which result in consumers' patronization of small local businesses.

Notably, with the emergence of “locavores” (i.e., people whose diet consists only or principally of locally grown/produced food), farm-to-table retailing largely represented by farmers markets has grown rapidly in recent years (Spielmann & Bernelin, 2015). In the United States, the number of farmers markets has increased from just under 2,000 in 1994 to currently more than 8,600 markets (United States Department of Agriculture, 2019). Farmers markets have a great potential to increase community-wide fruit and vegetable consumption (Hu et al., 2021), while reconnecting consumers with the land, revitalizing neighborhoods, and promoting a green and sustainable environment (Crawford et al., 2018; McCormack et al., 2010; Penney & Prior, 2014). Thus, research providing an in-depth view of farmers market patronage (FMP) will help local farmers and associated retail communities understand consumers’ unmet needs and wants and aid in designing effective strategies and programs promoting local food consumption and environmental sustainability.

One key area of research highlights FMP as a complex phenomenon, as consumers’ motivations may be multifaceted in nature. Hinrichs (2003) employed the concept of embeddedness and defined FMP as consumers’ economic behavior embedded in a complex web of social factors. A contrasting concept is marketability, which describes monetary transactions in a more traditional economic sense of truck and barter (Koponen, 2002). Notably, farmers market studies have utilized the general concept of embedded values as consumer patronage, and the quantity of markets has risen (Feagan et al., 2004; Feagan & Morris, 2009; Hinrichs, 2000; Kirwan, 2004). These values include support for local businesses; interactions based on trust; food safety and health; and environmental sustainability. For example, the Feagan and Morris (2009) study drew on previous research from Kirwan (2004) and Penker (2006) to develop three spheres of embeddedness: social, spatial, and natural. As consumer motivations partly reflect their historical and situated contexts, the embeddedness concept has the potential to deepen our understanding of FMP. Previous studies on embeddedness analyzed behavior through quantitative or mixed methods, potentially forcing separation between economic and non-economic motivations when they may possess a more complex relationship. Therefore, replicating and validating the different sociocultural contexts of embeddedness is warranted to confirm that specific sets of embedded values are universally manifested in FMP.

The aim of this study was to examine how the embeddedness framework explains consumer motivations for farmers market patronage in an uninvestigated region (Minnesota, USA). Specifically, this study centered around the following research questions: (a) how is embeddedness reflected and manifested in FMP? and (b) how well do farmers markets function as alternative retail spaces, and how is a valued meaning or experience created within them?

Literature Review

Farmers Markets

The globalization and industrialization of the agricultural food system have been met with some resistance, which has kept open other food systems, which are smaller and more local in scale (Spielmann & Bernelin, 2015). As an alternative, there is a deliberate intention to promote otherness and produce change in connectivity between the production and consumption of food through direct interaction between farmer and consumer (Kirwan, 2004). Alternative systems, including farmers markets, allow producers to gain some control over the display and price of goods while consumers control the assessment of goods they are purchasing.

A farmers market is a public and recurring assembly of farmers or their representatives selling the food they produced directly to consumers (Farmers Market Coalition, 2017). Shoppers can enjoy the summer breezes and the aroma of ripened fruit and fresh vegetables at farmers markets while socializing with their neighbors and local farmers (Murphy, 2011). These experiences are not always possible in traditional grocery retailing formats. Urban consumers appreciate fresh produce grown in their local area even when prices at farmers markets are not necessarily better than at local stores (Bianchi, 2017). One issue of farmers market ideas of reconnection to nature and community value is it limits the range of motivations to shop at such places. Farmers market patrons may already engage in local food consumption in multiple avenues, and thus the markets may not transform the food system but rather function alongside it.

Social interaction and support for the community are now considered major factors for farmers market patronage. Still, little research was conducted prior to 2000 to prove significance, and most studies combine economic with social or local factors. Hilchey et al. (1995) investigated the relationship between public markets and local economies to conclude markets are beneficial for “business incubation.” Farmers markets help keep money within the local community, which would otherwise be spent on goods grown or made elsewhere (Hilchey et al., 1995).

Considering the dramatic increase in the number of farmers markets in the United States, it is important to consider some of the challenges market managers face, including sustaining operations. Many new markets fail after only one to four years, with geographic location and population density as key factors in the lifespan of the markets (Stephenson et al., 2008). Wilson et al. (2018) found location of markets determined the challenges managers face, including parking and transit and relationships with vendors and the community.

There are multiple consumer and seller benefits at the farmers market: (a) through buying locally grown produce at farmers markets, consumers can support local farmers and contribute to revitalizing rural economies; (b) farmers also benefit through retaining more of the value of their produce by circumventing the “middlemen” in the supply chain; and (c) creating markets where consumers can buy produce from local farmers reduces the distance that food travels between

farmers and consumers, which decreases associated fossil fuel consumption and greenhouse gas emissions (Trobe, 2001).

To date, US researchers have developed a profile of consumers patronizing farmers markets in a particular state or region. For example, Andreatta and Wickliffe (2002) found that 88% of respondents shopped at farmers markets for fresh produce, 64% for local products, and 16% for inexpensive food. They listed distance to travel, seasonal variation in availability, and hours of operation as disadvantages to farmers markets.

Another study conducted in California reported that farmers market shoppers were more likely to be female, married, and have completed postgraduate work than non-shoppers (Wolf et al., 2005). They also found greater variation in middle or high-income households in the study than in a previous study they conducted ten years earlier, suggesting farmers markets may be attracting a more diverse group of shoppers now than in the late 1990s. Landis et al. (2011) found that patrons tended to be mostly female, non-smokers, and consumed the recommended amount of daily fruits and vegetables. The majority of the participants in the study purchased at least 40% of their produce from the market. While there is some conflicting literature on the income and education level of farmers market patrons, the most frequent shoppers appear to be older females concerned about healthy eating. Similarly, a study conducted in Nevada reported that consumers attending farmers markets primarily to purchase fresh produce tended to be married females at higher income levels, individuals with strong diet or health concerns, and individuals who were supportive of local farming and agriculture open space (Gumirakiza et al., 2014).

Embeddedness

In the literature published since 2000, researchers have shown a growing interest in the role of “embeddedness” in farmers market patronage. Previous research on sustainable agriculture and consumption of local goods focused primarily on production practices and preference for alternative food sources (Hinrichs, 2000). It separately analyzed the development of environmentally positive agricultural practices and the consumer resistance to more conventional farming and production methods without considering some of the more experiential and social factors involved in the choice of where to buy and from whom. Hinrichs (2000) proposed analyzing alternative food production and sales from an economic sociology perspective, which “explicitly addresses the context, process, and outcomes of exchange.” Embeddedness, specifically social embeddedness, is a major factor in economic sociology as a concept of non-economic motivations “embedded” in institutions (Machado, 2011). Embeddedness as a concept of social connection, reciprocity, and trust has been more recently applied to the study of alternative agricultural sales.

Farmers markets, as stated above, often involve more than the exchange of money and goods, including experience, community, and social exchanges. Reciprocity involves one party

exchanging resources with another, and in business exchanges, customers can expect more in return from sellers whom they patronize frequently and regularly (Huppertz et al., 1978). Sellers who maintain relationships with consumers may gain a competitive advantage over vendors who must seek out buyers in each market. Shoppers may benefit from vendor knowledge or special treatment. Resources being exchanged between vendor and shopper include information, money, goods, and services. These relationships can build from immediate payment for products to friends taking care of each other's needs (communal relationship) without counting debts or the need for immediate payment (Cutrona, 1996). Farmers markets allow consumers to have direct contact with growers or sellers, which generates value and is distinct from traditional grocery stores, devoid of much social interaction or special accommodation (Feagan & Morris, 2009).

Hinrichs (2000) argued that farmers markets rely on the social capital and trust gathered through embedded values to draw consumers to the venue despite less convenient locations, transaction methods, or a more limited selection of goods. Support of local farmers, trust, environmental concern, and awareness of food origin (Feagan & Morris, 2009) are more recent additions to the scope of embeddedness in agricultural literature. Analyzing these values helps generate a greater understanding of the factors influencing consumer behavior and purchasing decisions within the farmers market context. The Feagan and Morris study (2009) developed three spheres of embeddedness to use as a framework for their analysis: social, spatial, and natural.

Social embeddedness is a set of values, which includes social interaction, trust, and general responsibility (Feagan & Morris, 2009). It is an umbrella term for consumer desire for connection, belonging, community, and loyalty (Brown, 2002). To date, few studies have examined experiential aspects of farmers markets. Farmers markets may offer consumers a more enjoyable and sociable shopping experience. Customers may consider farmers markets to be more friendly, personal, and happier settings than mainstream food retailers. Shoppers may be offered the opportunity to taste produce before buying, and they may be able to ask questions about the produce and where it comes from, restoring consumer confidence and increasing product traceability (Trobe, 2001).

Natural embeddedness consists of patrons' desires for food produced in ways considered better for the environment, like organic or sustainable farming methods, contrasted with larger-scale food production methods (Halweil, 2002; Murdoch et al., 2000). Concerns about food quality and safety can be included in this concept, including genetically modified foods, food contamination, and pesticides. Through this set of values, local foods or foods of known origin can be associated with safety and trust (Halweil, 2002). Qendro (2015) found consumers in Albania and the UK trust farmers markets more than traditional supermarkets as a provider of good quality and organic fruits and vegetables. That study also revealed differences in perception of organic foods. UK shoppers consider organic foods pesticide-free and environmentally sustainable, while Albanian shoppers relate organic foods to those grown with traditional agricultural techniques. Therefore, terms associated with natural embeddedness may not translate

the same way for all farmers market patrons. Pitts et al. (2015) and Headrick et al. (2021) found sustainable direct farmer-to-consumer produce distribution increases fruit and vegetable consumption among low-income shoppers. Food quality and concern for the environment are frequent motivations to make local purchases and often appear in literature on farmers markets (Curtis et al., 2020; Feagan & Morris, 2009; Qendro, 2015). With the volume of food production needed to feed the United States population, the care given to the produce, handling of chemical pesticides, and transportation are issues for consumers. More consumers are purchasing locally due to concerns about these practices (Bloom & Hinrichs, 2011).

Spatial embeddedness is associated with the desire to buy local goods, where the producer and purchaser are more closely linked. It includes the perception that farmers markets contain fresher foods due to the physical proximity of the farmer to the point of sale. In contrast, larger retailers use a more complex production system, which often results in a greater physical distance between farmer and consumer (Murdoch et al., 2000). Prior research also reveals that consumers are willing to pay higher prices for local foods (Curtis et al., 2020; Darby et al., 2008) and that many people would prefer buying local (versus non-local) produce (see a review by Adams and Adams, 2011). Also, prior research identified barriers such as inconvenience and lack of accessibility often prevent consumers from purchasing local foods (Stephenson & Lev, 2004). Questions remain regarding the constitution of this 'local' notion in consumers' minds and hearts in the Midwestern United States. Perceptions of what makes up "local food" differ by region due in large part to varying climates, soil types, and populations (Peters et al., 2009), and so this study will not define local for them (but rather allow participants to determine what is local to them).

Methods

Research Setting

Similar to the method used by Feagan and Morris (2009), this study was conducted in a particular region (i.e., Minnesota, USA). The 2016 Minnesota Grown guides, a directory of local food resources published by the Minnesota Department of Agriculture, listed 177 farmers markets in Minnesota. Farmers markets in Minnesota generally have some form of open-air construction style, are found in larger metropolitan areas, and serve as a wholesale platform for farmers and small businesses (Stephenson & Lev, 2004). Several vendor restrictions exist within the markets, and some allow only growers to sell goods, not third parties. They are community-driven, with managers organizing weekly events and educational activities with local shoppers to create an environment and public image for the market (Klimek et al., 2018). In Minneapolis, non-profit organizations or associations generally manage farmers markets and make decisions through a board (Stephenson & Lev, 2004). Due to an emphasis on produce and farmers, local growers from central Minnesota and Western Minnesota are given preference as vendors over craft goods.

Spaces for vendors can be handed down through generations within the same farm, so vendors without a permanent spot can be assigned different locations each week depending on the availability of unused stalls (Stephenson & Lev, 2004). The predominance of farmers and managers of European descent shifted in the 1970s with the arrival of Hmong immigrants. Hmong people constituted around one percent of Minnesota's population but 50 percent of the farmers market vendors (Mohamud, 2017), which led to greater variation in produce and crafts sold at Minnesota farmers markets.

Sample Selection and Participant Recruitment

As this research seeks to describe a wide variety of experiences and commitments to farmers market shopping, participants were found through snowball sampling (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981), relying on referrals from seed participants used to reach the target population (i.e., farmers market patrons in Minnesota). Snowball sampling allows those interested in participating in the research to identify other potential participants who also qualify to participate and is considered a useful technique to recruit participants when conducting qualitative research (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981). None of the participants interviewed were known personally by the researchers, though they were referred by non-participants known to the first researcher. Emails were sent to recruit participants, along with a description of the study's purpose. Ten participants were recruited, and data were collected until saturation.

Participant characteristics in this study reflect previous literature on farmers market patrons (Landis et al., 2011; Wolf et al., 2005), with six of the ten participants between the age of 50 and 59. Seven were female, all were employed full-time with a bachelor's degree or higher, and all were white. All shopped at the farmers market at least once in the past year with frequencies between 1-15 trips during the spring/summer season. While the participants reflect the demographics shown in previous research on farmers market shoppers, their perspectives do not represent the experiences of all patrons but rather give a general direction for future exploration of patronage motivations.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data for this research were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews, gaining information through in-person contact with participants. This method is useful for exploring details and more elaborate reasoning behind behaviors. The semi-structured interview style uses a set of predetermined questions based on the research question and literature review (Creswell & Poth, 2018). It allows participants to speak freely in response to the questions and allows the interviewer to ask for follow-up responses.

Prior to data collection, an interview protocol was developed with a set of ten questions exploring the meanings, structures, and essence of the lived experience of farmers market patronage by consumers (e.g., Have you ever shopped at a farmers market? Why?). Next, the

interviews were conducted in public and private settings, allowing for private conversations, such as participants' homes, coffee shops, and libraries. The length of each interview was approximately 45-60 minutes. The interviews were recorded using a personal cell phone as well as through taking notes and were then transcribed verbatim. Each participant received a \$25 gift card after the in-person interview.

The data analysis was first done solely by one graduate student researcher. At this stage, the data were analyzed using the three steps based on the Moustakas (1994) model. First, data analysis began with open coding, which is the process of breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing, and categorizing data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The goal of open coding was to remain open to potential directions and results of the transcribed data. Thus, it was conducted in a nonlinear, iterative fashion. Potential codes were written next to the related transcript text during the open coding process but were tentative. Some codes were reworded as the analysis progressed through multiple readings. Second, the initially identified "open codes" were clustered into universal themes and subthemes. Once themes and subthemes emerged, multiple experiences expressed by participants overlapped and confirmed the data had reached saturation. Finally, the four themes and nine subthemes that emerged from the data were synthesized into textural-structural descriptions to describe the meanings and essences of the lived experience of farmers market patronage. The student researcher developed a comprehensive data analysis report in the form of her research thesis. In this report, each participant was given a pseudonym for anonymity, and relevant quotes describing the participants' individual experiences of farmers markets were highlighted.

Next, an 'investigator triangulation' strategy was adopted as an attempt to improve the reliability and validity of the findings (Denzin, 1978). Two faculty researchers refined and revised the initial subthemes generated by the student researcher. This process led to changes to the descriptions of four subthemes. The outcomes of the final synthesis process are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Themes and Subthemes Generated from the Final Synthesis Process

Theme	Subtheme	Sample Statement
Social Embeddedness	Vague Relationships with Local Vendors and Other Shoppers	<i>"That corn guy, which I was trying to think of his name, at the one on campus. I always go get his corn...and that's locally grown corn. This is the best."</i>
	Consumption Rituals with Family and Friends	<i>"My grandpa came over from Italy, and he would go to the farmers markets... And I thought it was a good thing and I kind of pass it on to my daughters too."</i>
	Multisensory Interactions	<i>"And just walking down the aisles, the smells of all the fresh vegetables. It's just wonderful. And the herbs, then I got hooked right away. So, it's sensual, and it's all the senses. It's the bright colors, it's the smells."</i>

Theme	Subtheme	Sample Statement
	Exploratory and Epistemic Experiences	<i>“There’s even things there that I ate growing up would have considered a weed and never get given a second thought to. But now working with the farmers now I know well, you can make tea out of something, or you know, enhance the pesto or whatever.”</i>
Spatial Embeddedness	Freshness	<i>“And as far as freshness I think the farmers market’s the freshest. It’s picked within days of when they sell it versus at a Target, they’re gonna have to transport it.”</i>
	Support for Local Businesses	<i>I always question if the people at the [Minneapolis] farmers market are actually farmers or if they’re getting it from somewhere else and passing off as their own.”</i>
Natural Embeddedness	Health of Self and Environment	<i>“And then plus it’s also good for the human body not to have the GMO. Genetically modified. Just because I know [my] body does better, and I know my wife does.... My garden is completely organic.”</i>
Other Factors	Convenience	<i>“At grocery stores, when I go, you generally don’t have to deal with traffic. The farmers market is always busy no matter what time you go.”</i>
	Price	<i>“I think the prices at the farmers market have been very fair. I’m sure that they’re watching to see what their neighbor in the next stall is selling because the prices are pretty much across the board for anything you want.”</i>

Results

Social Embeddedness

Vague Relationships with Local Vendors and Other Shoppers

Previous studies (Brown, 2002; Feagan & Morris, 2009) looked at social interactions as a general experience when shopping at farmers markets, focusing on vender and community relationship building. In this study, however, only one respondent reported relationship building as a motivator for farmers market patronage.

While several participants living in Minneapolis reported social interaction with vendors and other shoppers as a benefit of farmers market, their relationships are purely non-personal, buyer-seller interactions. However, an element of trust due to these interactions still seemed to develop, despite a lack of personal relationships. Respondents noted that the ability to discuss produce with the growers and ask questions about the season convinced them of the seller’s expertise. The majority of them mentioned often trying new foods at farmers markets and relying on these sellers to explain how to prepare or what other foods to pair with them.

Trust appears to be not so much developed with each grower as an individual but rather as a result of expectations about the knowledge the farmers or sellers possessed paired with the

consistent quality of goods. Consumers, in this study, developed trust based on displayed or implied knowledge about the products being sold. Positive experiences with products from specific vendors also developed trust. Participants reported returning to the same vendors, though they often could not recall the name of the grower or the company, to purchase the same produce or product because they believed the vendor would produce a good of similar quality again. However, socialization with vendors and other shoppers seems more of a bonus, which adds to the hedonic nature of the trip, but is not necessarily a strong enough motivator on its own to attend the market.

Consumption Rituals with Family and Friends

The greatest social motivator for FMP for all the respondents appeared to be time spent with close friends or family at the market. Six participants were introduced to farmers markets by family members. Notably, one participant mentioned FMP in a family ritual context as a fond memory of his grandfather that he passed on to his daughters.

On the other hand, four participants began going with friends while in college. The participant who goes to farmers markets least often and who displayed weaker social embeddedness began going and continues to go with a friend a few times a year. The others began attending farmers markets at various ages. One participant holds fond memories of farmers markets with his grandfather as a child, while another was introduced to them by a daughter who continues to shop with her at the farmers market today. Being able to participate in a family activity at the local market (looking around and chatting) appears to be one of the greatest influences of farmers market patronage for the participants.

Multisensory Interactions

Because the strength of social embeddedness appears within interpersonal relationships rather than vendors, participants do not always buy their goods from the same vendors. Therefore, they develop strategies to determine what to buy and from whom.

Three participants described nearly identical behaviors when first arriving at the farmers market. The first action taken when arriving at a farmers market is to walk down the main aisles to make note of prices or the appearance of the goods before retracing steps to make the final purchasing decision. When asked, participants agreed this surveying behavior is unique to farmers markets and that they shop in a much more task-oriented manner in grocery stores.

One of the reasons given for wandering before making purchases is to experience sensory elements of the market without the interruption of bartering or paying for goods. Participants engage multiple senses when walking through the market, including hearing chatter from vendors to other customers, the smell of herbs and produce, and the crisp feel of the air early in

the morning. Participants noted this was a unique experience they enjoyed, encouraging them to wake up early in the morning to make a trip to their preferred farmers market.

The choice of whom to buy from was generally driven by inspiration from how colorful or delicious the products looked. Therefore a full survey of the market allowed shoppers to not only compare but also determine what products looked tempting enough to buy. This behavior frequently led to impulse purchases for those participants who attended looking for a large amount of produce to eat and flexible meal preparation or planning.

Exploratory and Epistemic Experiences

Seven participants said the ability to be exposed to new foods and discuss the uses of products with vendors was a benefit to shopping at a farmers market over a grocery store. Because foods grow in seasons, participants said they often do not create a list of foods they plan to buy but rather wander the market to determine what looks the most delicious or ripe. One participant noted the friendliness of the vendor would determine if they were willing to ask questions about unfamiliar produce. Several others mentioned purchasing unknown produce because the vendor explained the taste and how it could best be prepared.

One participant said the Mill City Market hosts cooking demonstrations as well as children's events to increase awareness of different types of fruits and vegetables. Two participants mentioned they discuss uses of produce with other shoppers to gather cooking ideas or help fellow shoppers decide what they should buy based on previous experiences with the particular grower.

The majority of this behavior seems to be related to produce exploration, but a few participants also said they like to try food from other vendors like local restaurants or bakers. An interest in food and cooking seems to be a driver for this behavior amongst the participants.

Spatial Embeddedness

Freshness

All ten participants said freshness, specifically fresh fruits and vegetables, was an element of farmers markets, which was superior to traditional grocery stores. Participants' reasoning appeared to be perceived proximity of the farm to the market as well as time the produce spent in bins or on trucks before being sold.

Several stated they liked when stalls listed the name or location of the farm where the produce was grown as a reassurance that it was indeed grown locally. Though there is no set definition of local, participants mentioned the St. Paul farmers market required vendors to only sell goods grown within a 50-mile radius of the market, which gave those participants a definition of local goods they then referenced later when judging locality at other markets. When asked, however,

some could not identify where the idea of 50 miles as an indicator of locality came from and often clarified that they would consider a farm in Minnesota relatively local as well.

Participants implied the timing of the picking or production generated a superior-quality product because it was not damaged in transit or sitting in a large bin for long periods of time. Preference for food that has not been transported for a long time seems directly tied to the perceived quality of the food in participants' minds.

Support for Local Businesses

To varying degrees of importance, nine participants listed supporting a local farmer or business as a motivation to shop at farmers' markets. One participant admitted she knew no particular reason she felt buying local goods was positive, just that she felt that way. Thus, this interest does not drive the majority of her shopping and is a secondary benefit to other aspects of FMP. Another felt strongly that shopping local is important because she has personal involvement, stating her husband is a small business owner, and she likes to support small businesses with her purchases when she can or when the price is reasonable. One participant, who shops at the Mill City farmers market every Saturday, believes the support of small businesses is extremely important and purchases a variety of goods from the market, including canned foods, cheese, and sauces.

Most of the respondents fell somewhere between on the spectrum, noting they felt supporting small businesses was a positive action but would not necessarily go out of their way to do so. This behavior is demonstrated particularly in their shopping behavior in traditional grocery stores. Those who expressed a desire to buy local goods when possible do so at grocery stores as well, but the lack of evidence of locality is a major factor.

Participants expressed suspicion that the products at a farmers market are truly local unless the location of the farm or restaurant is explicitly stated. Because Minnesota has a limited variety of produce that can grow here, vendors selling products that cannot be made or grown in this area generate suspicion. A surprising number of participants recalled seeing pineapples sold at the Minneapolis farmers market and used it as an example of blatant selling of non-local goods. Signage stating the location of the business or farm was deemed the best way to communicate locality. However, a few participants stated that being able to talk about the seasonality of the foods in Minnesota built trust in that vendor as a knowledgeable local worker.

Natural Embeddedness

Health of Self and Environment

Three participants mentioned concern about purchasing organic or non-genetically modified foods. The participants who mentioned these concerns felt very strongly about the issue and

demonstrated knowledge of a range of agriculture concerns, such as the honeybee population, the use of pesticides, and seeds that have not been genetically modified. Two implied these foods were better for their health, but the main issue was avoiding chemicals and additives.

Notably, all three grow their own produce when possible and supplement their own gardens with products they are unable to grow or wish to try. Other participants expressed little to no direct concern about the environment but rather issues relating to the agriculture industry's harm to the environment. Using plastic packaging and bags at traditional grocery stores was considered harmful to the environment and unnecessary.

Pollution related to the transportation of goods was directly stated by only one participant, but several implied it was positive for the environment to purchase produce and canned goods locally. This theme was discussed significantly less by participants than the other two, but those who did mention the environment were deeply opinionated, passionate, and directly involved in natural or organic growing methods.

Other Factors

Convenience

Farmers market proximity to participants' homes was mentioned as a strong motivating factor for a majority of the participants. Three mentioned frequenting their local farmers market more often when it was or now that it is within walking distance of their homes. The ability to easily access markets without difficulty appears to be an issue for participants who drove and needed to park near the market in order to shop. City markets were highlighted for having parking issues, which often discouraged attendance except when the participants made a point to go very early in the morning to avoid both crowds and parking difficulties.

The two participants living in nearby suburbs did not mention parking or transportation issues, which suggests the amount and ease of access to parking near farmers markets within cities is not a concern for farmers market patrons. The participant who walks and bikes to her local market did not mention transportation issues either but pointed out the need for a wheeled basket or bike to be physically able to bring products home.

Crowds, too, were mentioned as an issue for farmers markets within cities. Participants shopping at the relatively large markets noted how crowded they often become during peak hours. Five developed a strategy to avoid crowds by shopping at the market early in the morning, while one participant stopped bringing his dog because it became too much of a hassle. An interesting distinction three participants made about this concern is an expectation of there being crowds at these places, which appeared to give participants more patience about wait time or crowds than in traditional grocery stores. Otherwise, there seemed to be a general dislike of crowding of both shoppers and stalls at the market. Participants living in the city expressed a desire for a balance

in the market size, disliking too many options and preferring a more condensed market to shop in. Those in the suburbs did not make these comments, which may be due to the general smaller sizes of the local markets in the suburbs compared to the much larger central city markets.

Price

In contrast with previous literature (Darby et al., 2008; Murphy, 2011), the three youngest participants mentioned low prices as a draw to attend farmers markets, particularly when buying in bulk. Previous studies found farmers market patrons to be less concerned about the price of goods with more focus on growing practices and freshness.

Despite the apparent price flexibility of the other respondents, the majority of those interviewed described a very similar process for choosing which vendor to purchase from. Notably, those who went less frequently tended to compare prices more than those who went often. Six of the ten participants listed price as an important factor in their purchasing behavior within the market. Consumers do not always compare farmers market prices to grocery store prices but seem to frequently compare different stands to one another within the same farmers market.

Participants said they would make note of prices of goods they were interested in during their survey of the farmers market as mentioned above and would create a mental plan or route to make their purchases. This route could be adapted depending on the interests of the other members of their shopping group. Still, this mental model based on the original farmers market survey helped shoppers recall which vendors had better products and prices. Participants believe farmers market products are generally superior to grocery store products may explain the comparison behavior between vendors, but not between farmers markets and grocery stores. It is important to note this behavior is not necessarily a motivator to patronize farmers markets. Still, money is a factor in general behavior, specifically once the shopper is at the market.

Discussion and Conclusions

How is Embeddedness Reflected and Manifested in Farmers Market Patronage?

Overall, participants expressed the majority of their motivations in two of the three embeddedness spheres. Similar to the Feagan and Morris (2009) study, spatial embeddedness themes of buying fresh produce in support of local farmers and businesses were discussed by participants as key factors in shopping at nearby farmers markets. However, participants did not place as much importance on social connections and relationship-building with vendors and the community as was shown in previous literature (Brown, 2002; Feagan & Morris, 2009). Rather, one of the greatest influences on consumer decisions to go to the market appeared to be family and friends with whom participants would travel to shop.

The limited expression of concern for natural embeddedness was also reflected in the results of this study. Some participants directly mentioned growing practices as a motivation to shop produce at the farmers market, while others indirectly mentioned a desire for more naturally developed produce not often found in traditional grocery stores. More than an environmental concern, the desire for ‘misshapen’ or ‘more natural’ produce was preference for taste and color. This finding is in line with prior research suggesting that consumers perceive informal markets, including farmers markets, to be more authentic for purchasing local food products (Bianchi & Mortimer, 2015; Renko & Petljak, 2018).

How Well do Farmers Markets Function as Alternative Retail Spaces, and How is a Valued Meaning or Experience Created within Them?

Price comparisons within the farmers market contradict previous studies (Brown, 2002; Feagan & Morris, 2009), demonstrating a lack of concern or focus on price as a motivator of patronage. Two participants mentioned low prices on bulk goods as a draw for farmers markets. However, a universal behavior was price comparisons within the farmers market to determine which vendors to purchase from. A lack of meaningful vendor relationships may result in price becoming the determining factor for purchases within the market. This behavior has not been discussed in farmers market research, perhaps due to the focus on motivation to patronize farmers markets rather than behaviors and purchasing decisions made once there. This potentially indicates similarities in price and quality comparison shopping behavior between farmers market shoppers and traditional grocery shoppers once at the preferred shopping location, but more research needs to be conducted to determine how alike or different those behaviors are.

From a theoretical perspective, the current study supports the usefulness of embeddedness as a conceptual framework for understanding farmers market patronage motivations. These results add to the literature by distinguishing between motivation to attend the market and shopping behaviors exhibited once there, highlighting a need for further research. The findings show certain economic elements of shopping do not greatly affect the choice to shop at the market but rather determine whom to buy from once inside the farmers market.

Although social embeddedness was not fully captured by our study, the idea that friends and family are the motivators to go to farmers markets can also be thought of as social capital where these individuals are going to the farmers market with their family and friends, and they are building and nurturing their relationships with their family and friends who go with them rather than specifically building relationships with the vendors selling at the farmers market. Social capital is an economic term that describes a phenomenon that exists within relationships and values that individuals have with their families and in their communities that is part of their social environment (Coleman, 1988, Hogan, 2001). Social capital not only captures the relationships the consumer has with their family and friends but would also capture the relationship the consumer would build with the vendors from whom they purchase their produce.

Hogan (2001) further states that the intersection of social capital of friends and family and their community connects to the “trust, safety, reciprocity, and exchanges that integrate family members within a community” (p. 151). Therefore, by broadening the definition of social embeddedness to include more than the relationships the consumer has with the vendors, our findings suggest that consumers are motivated to go to farmers markets to socialize with their family and friends through consumption rituals of locally grown foods at an alternative retail space.

The current study also provides useful implications for farmers market vendors and policymakers. Participants reported consistent quality of goods as one of the main reasons to not only shop at a farmers market but also continue to purchase from the same vendor. Making the display as colorful and plentiful as possible will likely attract more shoppers over displays that look sparse or not freshly picked. Signage communicating the origin of the produce or products would benefit sellers as well because there is less likelihood for shoppers to suspect it was not grown or made locally. Farmers market managers should also communicate if there are any limits on how far farms can be located to be considered ‘local’ as there is no set definition in Minnesota Policy. Extension educators can work closely with local policymakers to increase the state budget in its support of farmers markets and establish a support infrastructure for farmers markets at the state level. Local food infrastructure can include basic equipment and facilities such as warehouses or cold storage facilities, food processing facilities, and refrigerated trucks. Production technical assistance is also an important infrastructure to extend the farmers market season beyond the warm weather months. Given unconventional farmers markets are also on the rise (e.g., winter markets, mobile markets), access to local food infrastructure can open up tremendous opportunities for farmers markets (United States Department of Agriculture, n.d.).

Limitations

One limitation of this study is that the experiences of these participants may not reflect the full spectrum of consumer experiences with farmers markets in Minnesota. Those who responded to the email to be interviewed were consumers who shopped at farmers markets and possibly had positive experiences with the farmers market. They were more likely to keep returning and wanted to share their experiences versus those who frequent but were not interested in expressing their experiences with farmers market. Another limitation of this study is the similarities between participants. All were employed full-time with a bachelor’s degree or higher and were white.

Future Research

Future research with a more diverse set of participants should be conducted to gain a more complete understanding of the experiences of all farmers market patrons to determine if the results are similar or different. Thus, future research employing larger samples so that results could be generalized and applied is warranted. Future farmers market research should consider differences between farmers markets to determine why some farmers markets generate

passionate consumer loyalty while other markets possess more monetary transactions or do not attract enough shoppers. Research determining the influence of price, crowding, and convenience as factors encouraging patronage of one farmers market over another should also be conducted to see if these issues deter shoppers or whether they discourage attending one market but move the shopper to another, less problematic market.

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