

4.1.4 Building Public Health and Community in a University Town: Motivational Factors for Shopping at a Local Farmers Market by Graduate Students

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Abstract

Farmers markets represent a unique venue for analyzing the dynamic nature of communities. The purpose of this study was to describe the factors that motivate graduate students to patronize a local farmers market. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with six graduate students from a large university located in a rural town in the southern United States. Interviews were analyzed using constant comparative methods. Eight themes emerged: (1) Location and Distance, (2) Seasonality, (3) Community, (4) Social Interactions, (5) Consumer and Producer/Vendor Connection, (6) Production Methods, (7) Environmental Concerns, and (8) Economic Reasons. The results have potential to guide a marketing framework and strategies to help farmers markets appeal to a younger demographic of consumers. Future research should focus on farmers market patronage by other populations.

Keywords: farmers market, public health, community, graduate students, qualitative

Introduction

Public health endeavors build healthy communities through practices, programs, and policies that educate participants, influence healthy lifestyles, and prevent disease. Public health efforts span from water sanitation to anti-smoking campaigns to dietary intake. The unit of analysis for studying public health can occur at the individual, community, society, or the global scale. Communities are a unique unit of analysis for studying those factors that influence public health. Depending upon context, communities may be studied as geographic, psychological, or social units. McMillan and Chavis (1986) describe a “sense of community” as developed in four parts: by membership, mutual influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection. The four elements work dynamically together to create, integrate, and maintain a shared narrative, which fosters a sense of community (Mankowski & Rappaport, 1995).

Farmers markets (FMs) are one pivotal place for both community involvement and public health promotion. FMs are not only places for consumers to obtain healthy local foods (i.e. fruits and vegetables) or participate in consumer producer transactions, but also a place for gathering information about goods and forming relationships (Gillespie, Hilchey, Hinrichs, & Feenstra, 2007). The purpose of this study was to describe the factors that motivate graduate students to patronize a local farmers market. The graduate students’ views, preferences, and sense of community associated with shopping at FMs were examined through a qualitative design approach. This manuscript will first provide a literature review about community, university towns, and farmers markets, then discuss methodology, describe and examine results, and finally make recommendations for future research.

Literature Review

Community involvement appears to be declining among Americans (Putnam, 2000). Over the past 40 years, individuals report having fewer “ties that bind” and belonging to fewer social organizations (Caiazza, 2001). Participation or membership of citizens is influenced by many factors. Increased social expectations (i.e. time at work) and an emphasis on progress may contribute. Also, access to resources influences whether citizens become and remain active in their communities (Stephan, 2005). Participation in civic programs, many of these related to public health, may decline if a majority of a community’s citizens struggle with income and/or education (Caiazza, 2001). Further, Putnam (2000) describes the decline of American community in the 21st century as a result of changes in family structure, suburban explosion, and electronic entertainment with rapid advancement in technology.

However, communities that demonstrate higher income and/or education, such as the university town used in this study, indicate a strong sense of relatedness, or connection between citizens (Ryan & Patrick, 2001). Furthermore, a sense of community is correlated with increased motivation and academic success in students, perhaps explaining greater community connections in college towns (Ryan & Patrick, 2001). While historically there has been a divided relationship between universities and their surrounding towns (also called the “town-gown divide”) a recent citizen participation movement strives to create more engaged universities (Byrne, 2000; Mayfield, 2001). In order to increase engagement, universities are partnering with local and community-based organizations to help improve economic, social, and physical conditions of their communities (Carr, 1999; Franklin, 2009). Most recently, a form of university-civic engagement can be seen through student support of community gardens, community-supported agriculture, and farmers markets (Colasanti, Reau, & Wright, 2009; Wright, 2006).

One area where citizens and students can unite in communal participation is through the community food system (CFS). A CFS is a “food system in which food production, processing, distribution and consumption are integrated to enhance the environmental, economic, social, and nutritional health of a particular place” (Cornell University, n.d.). CFS participation promotes several aspects of public health in a community, including social, economic, and environmental health (Peters, 1997). A CFS strives to ensure a safe food supply, build relationships between farmers and community stakeholders, foster self-reliance that meets community needs, and promotes sustainable agriculture practices (Cornell University, n.d.). The CFS encompasses a variety of geographic contexts that include small areas (neighborhoods) to large cities, counties, and regions (Feagan, 2007).

Farmers markets (FMs) provide community members with the opportunity to support their CFS. The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) defines a farmers market as a place that “allows consumers to have access to locally grown, farm fresh produce, enables farmers the opportunity to develop a personal relationship with their customers, and cultivate consumer loyalty with the farmers who grows the produce” (United States Department of Agriculture [USDA], 2011). The number of FMs has grown exponentially from 340 in 1970 to 1,755 in 1994—when the USDA introduced its first FM directory—to 7,175 today. The exponential growth in FMs occurred especially after the passage of Public Law 94-463 (PL94-463), the Farmer-to-Consumer Direct Marketing Act of 1976 by the U.S. Congress (Brown, 2001). FMs are places that integrate economic activities, social processes, household needs, and community development (Gillespie et al., 2007). According to Payne (2002), FMs are a common facility where producers gather regularly to sell fresh fruits, vegetables, other farm products, and crafts directly to customers.

Researchers have identified several factors that increase the likeliness for consumers to purchase food from the FM. Common reasoning for consumers who shop at the FM include fresher and higher quality food, absence of chemicals, price, environmental concerns, economic support of farmers and local development, and nutrition (Eastwood, Brooker, & Gray, 1999; Kezis, Gwebu, Peavey, & Cheng, 1998; La Trobe, 2001; Lockeretz, 1986; Roininen, Arvola, & Lähteenmäki, 2006; Wolf, Spittler, & Ahern, 2005). As one example, consumer concerns for food safety have led to an increased awareness about where the foods are grown (Macias, 2008). Moreover, increasing consumption of fruits and vegetables, the staple foods at most markets, is directly related to decreasing the risk of major chronic diseases (Hung et al., 2004). Darby, Batte, Ernst, & Roe (2008) suggest consumer demand for locally produced foods leads to an increased patronization of FMs in the U.S. Several studies link FM patronage (i.e. purchase local food) with those consumers that have educational attainment and income level higher than the average population (Brown, 2002; Eastwood, 1996; Kezis et al., 1998). Furthermore, shoppers have been categorized as typically being female and

having the presence of another adult in the household (Zepeda, 2009).

The author is not aware of any research that explores motivations for university students—undergraduate or graduate—to patronize FMs. Graduate students were the unit of analysis in this study for a variety of reasons. First, research shows that college-educated individuals are more likely to patronize FMs (Brown, 2002). Second, many graduate students tend to live off-campus. When living off-campus, students are less likely to have a campus meal plan and therefore more likely to shop for groceries. Thus, the purpose of this qualitative study was to describe the public health and community factors that motivate graduate students to patronize a local farmers market. This study was approved by Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board.

Methodology

Data collection

To collect the data, researchers conducted six face-to-face interviews. As Seidman (2006) suggests, interviewing is a way to understand the lived experiences of others and how they make meaning of those experiences. A semi-structured interview protocol, developed by the researchers, was used. The interviews were designed to occur for 30 and 40 minutes. With the consent of participants, the interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed by the researchers. Researchers and participants chose the venues for interviews mutually. Times and places for interviews were chosen when distractions would be at a minimum.

Participants

Participants for this study were recruited using the snowballing technique (McMillan, 2008). That is, an initial email script was sent to a likely participant known by the researchers to meet the inclusion criteria; this participant was asked to forward the recruitment email to others who met the inclusion criteria and were also likely to participate. The study occurred in a large southern United States university town. The three inclusion criteria for this study were that the participant: (1) was currently a graduate student at the particular large, southern, rural United States university, (2) had lived in the Southern, rural United States university town for at least one year, and (3) had shopped at the FM in the Southern, rural United States university town at least once in the past month.

Six participants agreed to take part in the study—three males and three females (see Table 1 for demographic information). All participants were white and ranged in age from 22 to 30. Five of the participants were single and one was married; none of the participants had children. The graduate students were enrolled in academic programs that included engineering, natural resources, nutrition, math, and public policy. In addition to shopping at the local FM for groceries, participants reported shopping at supermarkets and health food stores. All of the participants lived within one half of a mile to five miles of the farmers market.

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics and Farmers Market Shopping Habits of Study Participants

	Number of Participants	Percentage of Participants
Gender		
Male	3	50%
Female	3	50%
Race/Ethnicity		
White (non-Hispanic)	6	100%
Income		
< \$10,000	1	16.7%
\$10,000 - \$24,000	4	66.7%
\$25,000 - \$49,000	1	16.7%
Marital Status		
Single	5	83.3%
Married	1	16.7%
Age Range		
	22 – 30, mean = 27	
Time spent at FM		
0-30 minutes	3	50%
30-60 minutes	3	50%
Money spent at FM		
< \$5	1	16.7%
\$5 - \$20	3	50.0%
> \$20	2	33.3%
Times per month shopped at FM		
1 – 2	2	33.3%
2 – 4	2	33.3%
> 4	2	33.3%
Distance of FM from residence		
	.5 miles – 5 miles, mean = 2 miles	

Data analysis

In analyzing the data, the researchers followed a constant comparative thematic analysis method described by Creswell (2005). After reading each interview transcript several times, the researchers individually developed a list of preliminary codes. The researchers read each transcript individually to ensure validity that Shank (2002) posits, “deals with the notion that what you say you have observed is, in fact, what really happened” (p. 92). The preliminary codes were discussed among the researchers and organized into common categories. These categories were then examined for overlap and condensed into overarching themes to bring “meaning, structure, and order to data” (Anfara, Brown & Mangione, 2002, p. 31). Patton (2002) suggests that enormous amounts of data can be interpreted from a qualitative study. To refine interpretations, researchers ensured that themes identified answered initial study questions (Yin, 1994).

Verification of qualitative analysis is critical for the credibility of the study (Creswell, 2007; Rossman & Rallis, 2003).

In this study, verification of the data occurred through peer review, negative case analysis, and clarification of researcher bias. At each stage of the analysis, researchers discussed and debriefed with each other in order to come to a mutual understanding of the data. During these peer debriefings, researchers also analyzed and discussed any negative cases and how this affected the emerging themes. Researchers completed detailed field notes and analytic memos throughout the study to ensure reflexivity. In doing this, researchers were able to clarify their biases and strengthen the trustworthiness of the study (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982; Creswell, 2007).

Results

Based upon the analysis of the six interview transcripts, eight themes emerged that described the motivational factors of graduate students to patronize the local FM: (1) Location and Distance, (2) Seasonality, (3) Community, (4) Social Interactions, (5) Consumer and Producer/Vendor Connection, (6) Production Methods, (7) Environmental Concerns, and (8) Economic Reasons. See Figure 1. The themes that emerged from this study resonated with earlier studies (Lockeretz, 1986; La Trobe, 2001; Wolf et al., 2005).

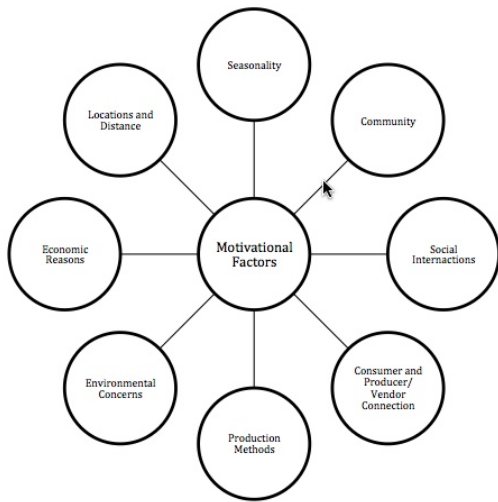


Figure 1. Concept map of motivational factors for graduate students to patronize the local farmers market.

Location and Distance

Most of the graduate student participants considered proximity of their residences, academic buildings, and offices an important factor in patronizing the FM. All participants attended the FM on a regular basis, but they reported shopping there more frequently when lived or worked closer to the FM. One participant who has lived several places in town during his time at the university explained:

The closer I've lived to the market, i.e. the closer I've lived to downtown, I've more frequently shopped at the market. When I lived on the far side of town, that was probably the least often I would go. When I was over there it would typically be on Wednesdays when I would already have ridden my bike into campus and be close to downtown. Now that I live closer it's just a quick walk to go either on a Wednesday or a Saturday. So, yea, closer is definitely better for my frequency.

However, one participant who lived farther away than other participants said, "It [distance] does not matter currently. I shop there as often as if I lived next door." For this participant, the location of the FM did not influence his decision to shop there.

Seasonality

The participants' shopping behaviors were determined, in large part, by the season. The availability and variety of vegetables and fruits growing at different times of the years influenced the frequency of market shopping. During the summer, a variety of produce is abundantly available. Wintertime brings a proliferation of root vegetables, but less variety of produce. The theme of seasonality came through when one of the participants mentioned, "Right now [in late fall], I don't really want to go that much because you know it's the fruits and vegetables are less than during the summer." Other participants echoed this comment as well. Another participant said:

During the seasons where there's a lot of harvest, I pretty much always or almost exclusively shop at the FM. In the winter, I'll still go regularly, but of course there is less produce and stuff so I'll probably be getting more percentage of food from the grocery store.

As this participant pointed out, while there is more variety at the market during certain seasons, the participants did not cease shopping at the FM in the winter months.

Community

The local FM provides an important platform for people living in town to come together and share a sense of

community. Many participants provided unsolicited comments about the sense of community that the combination of food and events at the market create. The FM patrons constitute a diverse group of people from varied ethnic and cultural groups. One participant said:

It's not as if there's a certain type of person or a certain lifestyle or a certain demographic profile that shops there. There really are young and old and a variety of different ethnicities and races and people of different socioeconomic brackets and all sorts of different lifestyle choices in terms of whatever their soapbox issues are. So it really is a good snap shot of the [local] community.

Not only is farm fresh produce available, but also musical events and educational activities provide a venue for meaningful social interactions. One participant characterized the sense of community that events bring to the market as:

At least once a month they have the live music there and so you go there and it just feels like you're at a festival or a party or something. It's really kind of uplifting, I guess. It feels fun. Like, sometimes I go there and I don't even buy that much, but I still have a good time just because I'm watching people hula-hooping or talking to people that I know there.

Another participant summed the holistic sense of the community that the market by remarking:

I think it builds the community. It adds a sense of connectedness not only between people but also between people, and the farms, and lands and the food and be more connected with foods is important in a lot of ways. And you know it gives a place where people can come and hang out and it is good.

Social Interactions

It is possible to shop and use self-checkout at a grocery store and supermarket with no social exchange between the shopper and other customers or employees. The hustle and bustle of the FM facilitates social interactions between community members. A participant qualified his experience by saying:

You, you end up talking a lot more to other people than you do in a grocery store. I mean, typically you go to the grocery store and you don't talk to anyone. Even the checkout people, I mean now you don't even need to see the checkout person, you can just go through the automated line.

The social interactions also seemed to occur on a regular basis. As one participant said, "You walk around and you sit on the benches and you run into people you know..." Another added, "You won't be surprised at seeing anyone at the farmers market." While most participants appreciated the social aspect of the FM, one participant was not motivated by this, saying, "I have not used it in that way, but that's because I don't want to run into all of my professors either."

Consumer and Producer/Vendor Connections

Participants also appreciated the personal connection between the consumers and producers or vendors. "It's nice on a personal level to have some form of connection or a relationship with the vendors," one participant explained. Another participant agreed with this sentiment stating:

So this idea of local agriculture is being connected to the person that is selling you the food, who is more connected to the land and where it comes from than the person at the grocery store. And in some way it is important to build those relationships.

Across the interviews, participants felt that the vendors at the farmers market were approachable and felt comfortable asking questions. One participant explained, "I've asked for preparation tips. Sometimes I'll see something that I don't know how to use or what it is, so I'll ask the farmer what it is and what to do with it." He then expanded, "I've gotten into conversations with other people there too...I remember one time about spaghetti squash...there was this whole discussion between the farmer and two or three other people at the stand about what to do with the spaghetti squash."

Production Methods

All participants mentioned shopping at the FM as a result of the sound production methods in which farmers engage. It was important to the participants that the products they were consuming caused minimal environmental harm during production. This idea was best summarized by a participant, who said, "It's the whole idea of trying to have as small of a footprint as reasonably possible without being ascetic."

Direct producer/vendor relationships were also important because participants knew they were supporting farmers in their local area who engage in the practice of sustainable farming: a practice that includes, among other, avoidance of fertilizers and pesticides. Their belief was that fruits and vegetables that come off the farm directly to the market are fresher, safer, and tastier than those available at grocery store. By building these relationships, several of the participants suggested that they trusted their farming practices more:

I think also a big one is knowing the people who are growing the livestock or growing the produce. It's nice on a personal level to have some form of connection or a relationship with those people but also knowing their practices in terms of their farming practices.

Environmental Concerns

Across all of the interviews, participants mentioned environmental concerns as a reason to shop at the farmers market. Several participants discussed the value of buying local food as a way of saving on the energy costs that are associated with shipping foods long distances to be sold at grocery stores. Supporting this idea, one participant said:

Transportation is a huge energy [cost]. If you buy something at a grocery store that is from Peru, that is going to have huge costs in terms of energy in terms of transportation and oil. Where as if you were to get it from down the street it is better because it is not much of energy thing.

In commenting about the environmental impact of food one participant explained further:

On a food consumption level the food generally is fresher or more flavorful than stuff you find at a grocery store simply because it doesn't have to travel x number of hundreds or even thousands of miles, in some cases, to get to the grocery stores in the area. That brings up another point, that the decreased number of food miles that something has to travel to get here. So it makes more sense in terms of consumption patterns and it makes more sense in terms of emissions of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases.

Economic Reasons

A common theme that emerged throughout the interviews was the idea of supporting the local economy by shopping at the FM. As one participant said, "I try to inject as much of my necessary expenditures as possible into the immediate economy, the local economy." Another participant expanded on this idea by explaining that when she shops at the FM, she is able to see where and to whom her money is contributing. Other participants expressed their dislike of large, chain grocery store monopolies. For example, a participant stated, "There is somewhat of a monopoly of giant, larger agricultural systems. And so I would rather support a local individual family size system."

However, participants also recognized that, while they may try to do most of their shopping at the FM, all of their needs could not be met there and they needed to supplement their shopping elsewhere. As one participant stated, "everything that I want is not going to be available in the local economy."

Discussion

Findings from this study were comparable to other studies related to identifying factors that motivate the patronage of FM. Zepeda and Li (2006) identified several significant motivational factors including economic reasons and connections to vendors similar to this study. Further, Jolly (1999) identified factors related to location and distance, and seasonality of produce available as major reasons for shopping at local farmers markets. Production methods,

social interactions/gathering with the community and environmental concerns were also identified as primary motivational factors for shopping at farmers markets (Baker, Hamshaw, & Kolodinsky, 2009; Onozaka, Nurse, & Thilmany, 2010). In reviewing the results of these studies, the major themes identified in this study were common findings from other studies that examine customer motivations (discussed in the introduction). While this study was not designed to rank motivational factors (participants did not indicate importance) in order of perceived importance, the aforementioned studies made this attempt. Interestingly, each prior study ranked themes identified in this study, for the most part, in the top half of motivational factors identified. Hence, the findings of this study have been identified as major factors for patronizing farmers markets by other researchers and indicate that graduate students choose and use farmers markets much like other patrons.

The study results also lend credence to McMillan and Chavis's (1986) view of sense of community: by membership, mutual influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection. Graduate students patronized the farmers market because of personal, environmental, and economic concerns that are supported both by a sense of community and the aims of improving public health. Graduate students described feelings of membership and shared emotional connection by the ability to connect with the vendors and community members while shopping for goods. Participants felt mutual influence when they explained their ability to control their choice between the FM and chain supermarket. To that end, several of the participants commented about the benefits of supporting local food and its influence on community ties. An integration and fulfillment of needs was elaborated when graduate students described their motivations for supporting the FM, including: a potential absence of pesticides, nutrition, freshness, and support of farmers and the local economy. All of these claims are consistent with other previous studies (Baber & Frongillo, 2003; Eastwood et al., 1999; Hinrichs, 2000; Hunt, 2007; Kezis et al., 1998; La Trobe, 2001; Lockeretz, 1986).

It is not surprising that the graduate students interviewed were in support of the farmers market for reasons beyond purchasing food. Several professional organizations and educational programs around the country support the growing concept of community food systems, which focus on several components of public health – food, environment, social interactions. Some examples of outlets for learning about community food systems for graduate students include Sustainable Agriculture Education Association, higher education degree programs, and the Real Food Challenge (Real Food Challenge, 2010; Sustainable Agriculture Education Association, 2010; United States Department of Agriculture, 2010). These programs demonstrate a growing demand for graduate student involvement in community food systems.

It is important to note that the researchers in this study were all patrons of the local FM. However, the degree of involvement with the FM was varied—some researchers shopped there only occasionally while other researchers were deeply involved in human nutrition and local foods. This wide range of backgrounds strengthened the study results because each perspective was taken into account when interpreting the interviews.

Limitations

This study had several limitations. First, the participants were not from a diverse demographic of graduate students—all of the participants were white, between the ages of 22 and 30, and had no children. A more diverse sample, including older graduate students with families, might lend a different perspective on FM shopping motivations. Second, the researchers only used interviews to collect data. While this provided rich, thick descriptions of the graduate students' motivational factors, it may have been helpful to use other data collection methods, like observations and population surveys, to add to the results.

Future Research

Study results indicate that when FMs are in university towns emphasize builds community and, as an extension, public health. It is a community social gathering place that minimizes the town-gown divide and an arena to practice personal, environmental, and economic beliefs alongside other community members. The researchers believe that this in-depth understanding has the potential to develop a marketing framework for FMs. Similar to comparable consumer markets, utilizing the findings from this study will help market planners implement policies, provide products most likely to appeal to the graduate student demographic, and include individuals representative of this demographic in evaluating

market outcomes. Future marketing considerations are two-fold: how to attract young adults to the market and how to keep them coming back. Certainly, further qualitative studies investigating other populations in a university town (i.e. undergraduate students, faculty, staff, and community members) would be of great benefit to help address these considerations.

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