Exploring Consumer Constructions of Local Food: Meanings and Influences

Introduction

In parallel with a growing consumer interest in local food over the past two decades or more, significant attention has been given to the consumption of locally produced food (Zepeda and Deal, 2009; Blake *et al*., 2010; Megicks *et al*., 2012; Birch *et. al.*, 2018). An extensive body of literature on local food systems has developed in the wider rural sociology field since the early 1990s. This includes studies on alternative food networks (AFNs), addressing themes such as civic agriculture (DeLind, 2002), post-productivism (Mather *et al.*, 2006), food miles and shortened supply chains (Hinrichs, 2003). Food safety and ethical concerns led towards a new food economy and an alternative geography of food production, marked "the turn to quality" (Murdoch *et al.*, 2000); a concept that has received significant attention in the food systems literature over the past 15-20 years. Within the marketing domain, studies on local food consumption have focused on the range of motivations for purchasing local food (Weatherell *et al.*, 2003; Nurse Rainbolt *et al*., 2012; Megiks *et al*., 2012; Memery *et al.*, 2015), consumers' food lifestyles (Mirosa and Lawson, 2012) and "food purism" (Heslop, 2007, p. 29). This paper largely draws on insights from the marketing and food systems literatures and theories on consumer attitudes and behavioural intention to explore the meaning that consumers attach to the term "local food" and how such values are manifest as influences on the local food purchase intention.

While the emergence of the local food movement has had significant implications for marketers, it remains an underdeveloped area of study. Studies on organic or local food choice behaviour

have tended to rely heavily on a quite narrow range of conceptual models to explain and understand the purchase intention of local/organic food (Nurse Rainbolt *et al.*, 2012; Dowd and Bruke, 2013; Sharma *et al.*, 2014). Further, there remains little understanding of how consumers perceive the concept of local food and the values they attach to the concept (Roininen *et al*., 2006). The term "local" is complex and quite personal in nature (Selfa and Qazi, 2005; Khan and Prior, 2010; Knight 2013). Any understanding of the term varies according to its users and "local" has come to mean many different things to consumers in varying contexts (Hand and Martinez, 2010; Safania, 2013; Trivett, 2015; Kremer *et al.*, 2016). While the broad range of influences on local food consumption are now quite well documented, the interplay of attributes of local food and their relative importance requires more investigation (Megicks *et al.*, 2012). Thus, there is a need for a closer examination of local food systems, to explore the ambiguities and subtleties of the ideas of localness and quality (Holloway and Kneafsey, 2000; Allen *et al*., 2003; Winter, 2003; Dunne *et al*., 2010) and to unravel the mix of influences on local food consumption.

In this paper we seek to specifically explore the role of moral norms in the local food purchase intention. Within the food choice literature, along with attitudes, social (normative) pressure and moral norms have been found to be significant independent predictors of intentions and behaviours (Raats *et al.*, 1995; Sparks *et al*., 1995; Sparks and Shepherd, 2002), yet the role of social norms has rarely been addressed in local food studies (Feldmann and Hamm, 2015) and there have been relatively few studies that have sought to measure how attitudes and moral norms combine to impact purchase intention and actual behaviour. Consumers' feelings about local products and the extent to which decisions are made based on positive emotions such as pride and a sense of fulfilment and satisfaction from supporting the local community, or alternatively feelings of obligation, guilt and sense of responsibility, will be of strong interest to

marketers in their efforts to understand the drivers for local food purchasing, the implications for the types of messaging used in marketing communications and the possible impact of communications activities on behaviour. Thus, while the study seeks to contribute to a better understanding of local food consumption from the perspective of the consumer, knowledge of the factors that influence consumption activity will be of interest to food supply chain actors and policy makers.

The paper is structured as follows. It begins by examining attitudinal and behavioural intention models and behavioural studies that have been adopted previously to explain local food purchasing. It then considers the local food context and specifically definitions of local food and the literature on local food purchase motivations and influences. The paper draws upon studies from the food consumption and marketing literature, and relevant themes from the local food systems and rural sociology literature. A number of research questions are then stated in relation to knowledge gaps identified from the review of the literature. Each research question is given consideration in the findings and discussion sections.

Conceptual Framework

Attitudes, Moral Norms and Purchase Intention

The connection between attitudes, intention and behaviour has been addressed by the theory of reasoned action (TRA) (Ajzen and Fishbein, 1980) and latterly through the extended theory of planned behaviour (TPB) (Ajzen, 1991). These models have been used extensively in areas such as shoplifting (Griev, 2014), traffic violations (Elliot, 2012), energy conservation (Black, Stern and

Elworth, 1985) recycling (Thogerson, 1996, Rhodes *et al.*, 2014), environmentally friendly purchases (Jang *et al*., 2014) and organic food purchases (Dowd *et al*., 2013). The TPB has been employed quite extensively in studies on organic or local food choice behaviour (see for instance Sheperd, 1999; Nei and Zepeda, 2011; Nurse Rainbolt *et al.*, 2012; Sharma *et al.*, 2014).

The theory of planned behaviour suggests that behaviour is best predicted by behavioural intention, in other words, if someone has formed the intention to do so beforehand, then they are going to perform that particular behaviour (Ajzen, 1991). Behavioural intention is thought to be determined by an individual's attitudes and the perceived social pressure to perform the behaviour ("subjective norm") or normative beliefs. The TPB also includes perceived behavioural control (PBC), a measure of an individual's perceived ability to perform the behaviour which is in question. The model predicts that attitudes and subjective norms indirectly influence behaviour via behavioural intention, whereas PBC can have both an indirect effect, via intention, and a direct effect on behaviour.

Studies employing the TPB have consistently found support for its predictive power. The model has been employed to explain consumer food choice and food purchasing behaviour more convincingly than other behavioural models (Onazoka *et al*., 2011; Stanton *et al*., 2012). However, there has been substantial criticism of the TPB. The TPB has been mainly criticised for its focus on rational reasoning, excluding unconscious influences on behaviour. In particular, an individual's intention and subsequent failure to act on that intention has been a recognised limitation that remains unaddressed by the theory (Sniehotta *et al*., 2013).

In addition to the original variables suggested by Ajzen and Fishbein (2000), a number of others,

such as anticipated effect (Richard, 1994), self-identity (Sparks and Shepherd, 1992), perceived need (Paisley and Sparks, 1998) and moral norms (Parker *et al.*, 1995; Kim *et al.*, 2014) have been added to the TPB through theoretical and empirical studies. Moral norms affecting attitude to purchase intention incorporate the concept of moral obligation and associated emotional feelings such as guilt. An individual can experience feelings of guilt when behaviour and intentions are inconsistent with ethical judgements (Ferrell *et al.*, 1989), which can in turn influence future behaviour (Marks and Mayo, 1991). Within the food choice literature, along with attitudes, moral norms have been found to be significant independent predictors of intentions and behaviours (Raats *et al.*, 1995; Sparks *et al*., 1995; Sparks and Shepherd, 2002). More recently, studies on organic food have found support for the impact of strong ethical values, moral norms and self-identity on purchase intention (Honkanen *et al.,* 2006; Dean *et al.*, 2012). Thus, studies that have sought to extend the TPB and understanding of the relationships between attitudes, intentions and behaviours have highlighted the influence of moral norms as significant independent predictors of intentions and behaviours.

The Local Food System

Within the emerging literature on local food systems, the term "local" has been defined in many ways and has been conflated with specialty, traditional, artisan and quality foods (Morris and Buller, 2003). While definitions have focused on the benefits and attributes of being local such as convenience, health, status, sustainability or preservation of open space (Selfa and Qazi, 2005; Blake *et al.*, 2010) most attention has been given to the distance between production and consumption, as a means of distinguishing the local food system from "conventional" or modern mainstream food channels (Peters *et al*., 2008). Here, the term "local" implies a closed or bounded

system where food is produced, processed and retained within a geographical (Smith and Mackinnon, 2007; Blake *et al.*, 2010; Pearson *et al.*, 2011) or political boundary such as a community, region, state or province, or country (Selfa and Qazi, 2005; Khan and Prior, 2010) or based on specialty brands or designations associated with a region (Ilbery and Maye, 2006; Kneafsey *et al*., 2013; Tregear *et al.*, 2015). The term implies a system of food supply that is in some ways alternative from conventional channels (Sonnino and Marsden, 2006; Knight, 2013), and an alternative social movement in opposition to industrial or corporate agriculture (Adams and Salois, 2010; Wessi, 2011). Here, "local food" has been defined as a social relationship between the consumer and producer (Smithers *et al.*, 2008; Weiss, 2011), indicative of provenance and trustful relations (Blake *et al*., 2010).

The factors underlying local food consumption have received attention within the food systems and marketing literatures. Marketing studies have made a distinction between factors relating to self-interest motivations and those relating to wider civic factors. Weatherell *et al.* (2003) identified moralistic/altruistic motives (i.e. moral, health concerns, origin) and self-interest (intrinsic product qualities and price). Similarly, Mirosa and Lawson (2012) considered self-interest and altruistic dimensions through their personal and social categories. Megicks *et al*. (2012) came up with four drivers (local support and provenance, ethical sustainability and self-interest, intrinsic quality and shopping benefits) and two inhibitors (product distractors and buying inconvenience) of local food purchasing associated with these categories. These categorisations suggest that consumers make purchase decisions for reasons beyond the product level, and in response to wider food and civic concerns.

The self-interest or personal motivations for purchasing local food have received considerable

attention and have covered such factors as health consciousness (Steptoe *et al*., 1995; Pearson *et al.*, 2011; Hollywood *et al.*, 2013), emotional attachment (King *et al*., 2008, Gurerro *et al.*, 2010) social interactions (Fegan *et al*., 2004; Vecchio, 2012), security and traceability (Hinrich, 2013; Kirwan *et al.*, 2013) safety and quality (Rijswijk and Frewer, 2008; Kirwan and Maye, 2013), sensory properties (Stolzenbach *et al.*, 2013), morality (Dean *et al*., 2008), experience (Mojet and Koster, 2005) and trust and familiarity (Kim *et al.*, 2008; Seo *et al*., 2013). Package information on food production methods and product origin is increasingly relevant for consumers who want to better understand the associated product attributes (Hoogland *et al*., 2007). Packaging displaying the product's origin can act as a signal of product quality (Roth and Diamantopoulos, 2009; Wang *et al*., 2012) and affect perceived risk and value as well as the likelihood of purchase (Nadeau *et al*., 2008) and a willingness to pay more (Costanigro *et al*., 2014).

Some support has been found for a direct link between altruistic motivations and a willingness to pay a premium price for local foods (Umberger *et al.*, 2009; Nurse Rainbolt *et al*. 2012) in the belief that not supporting local produce might have an adverse effect on local people and thus, simultaneously damage the local economy (Chambers *et al.*, 2007; Steenkamp and de Jong, 2010). Altruistic motivations have been found to include the socially responsible activity of consumers in supporting local food, the local economy and associated environmental benefits (see for instance Nie and Zepeda, 2011; Autio *et al.*, 2013; Hashem *et al.*, 2018). Here, food choice involves an emotional attachment (King *et al*., 2008) where altruistic behaviour is influenced by feelings of moral obligation to act on personal internalised norms (Onwezen *et al*., 2013). However, it has been argued that ethical consumption is not purely altruistic but rather a consumption process characterised by self-satisfaction, and one which is highly individualistic and social identity driven (Davies and Gutsche, 2016). The need for community and fellowship, social interaction and

atmosphere have all been highlighted as key reasons why consumers participate in their local food system (Brown and Miller, 2008; Smithers *et al*., 2008; Vecchio, 2009).

The relative power of motivations underlying local food purchasing has received limited attention in the literature. However, from the few studies that have been conducted, there are contrasting viewpoints on the influence of various factors. Weatherell *et al.* (2003) found consumers to be motivated primarily by product features such as taste, freshness, appearance and availability rather than the aforementioned wider altruistic or civic factors. While later work by Memery *et al.* (2015) and Megicks *et al.* (2012) did provide support for a broad range of factors associated with self-interest and altruism, their studies found that support for local producers was a more important factor in explaining purchasing intentions and behaviour than intrinsic quality (product quality) and wider ethical and sustainability issues. The issue of trade-offs and perceived behavioural control (PBC) arises in relation to ethical issues, in that people want to buy ethically but the more pragmatic matters of price, convenience, accessibility and product quality prevent this.

The outcomes produced by a food system are contextual and "depend on the actors and agendas that are empowered by the particular social relations in a given food system'' (Born and Purcell 2006, p.6). The relationships between gender, race, class and local food consumption and ethical eating have been explored within the sociological, anthropological and feminist literatures, covering themes such as food politics and the mother's role in educating, informing, and monitoring household preferences (Miller, 1998; Cairns *et al*., 2013; Cairns and Johnston, 2015; 2018). The concepts of "motherhood capital" (Lo, 2016) and the "good mother" (Cairns and Johnston, 2015) have been used to convey the expert decision-maker role played by mothers

regarding their children's food consumption. Within the marketing literature, the influence of demographic variables on local food interest has been found to be mixed. Typical local food consumers have been characterised as female, highly educated (Zepeda and Li, 2006) with above average incomes (Brown, 2003; Wolf et al., 2005). It has been argued that socio-demographic variables are weaker discriminators of local food interest than attitudinal variables (Tregear and Ness, 2005; Zepeda and Li, 2006). There has been some evidence of positive relationships between perceptions of local food, buying behaviours and personal factors such as age (Tregear and Ness, 2005; Mirosa and Lawson, 2012; Memery *et al.*, 2015; Kumpulainen *et al*., 2018), education level (Mirosa and Lawson, 2012), gender (Khan and Prior, 2010; Memery *et al*., 2015) and income levels (Stanton *et al.*, 2012). Weatherell *et al.* (2003) found that rural consumers were generally better informed and more concerned about food civic matters than urban residents. Likewise, Tregear and Ness (2005) found that residency in a rural area was positively associated with high interest in local foods and attributed this to their personal contact with farming.

In summary, the literature has provided a number of important insights into the broad forms of influences on local food purchasing and has signaled the intricacies that may exist between the main influences. However, there remain a number of gaps in knowledge to be addressed. From the review of the literature, there are three specific research questions in relation to knowledge gaps which will be explored during the empirical stages. These are:

RQ1 What does the term "local food" mean to consumers from respective socio-demographic backgrounds?

RQ2 What is the relationship between the influences on the purchase intention?

RQ3 How influential are moral norms and what is the impact on purchase intention within

the local food context and in relation to consumer characteristics?

Methodology

A two-stage qualitative methodology was adopted consisting of focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews with consumers in Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland has a rapidly growing local and artisan food sector and increasing consumer demand for specialist, local food products representing authenticity and freshness (Mintel, 2017). Thus, the changing market conditions in Northern Ireland provides an interesting setting within which to explore the consumer relationship with local food.

The use of qualitative analysis is appropriate when the objective is to delve deeply into the meaning of human action (Schwandt, 2001; Creswell, 2014). It has been argued that more research into consumer purchasing behaviour should take a qualitative approach (Hingley *et al*., 2011; Fonseca *et al.*, 2019). Specifically, there have been calls for qualitative approaches in the study of local food consumer motivations (Weatherell *et al*., 2003; Davies and Gutsche, 2016) and for revealing how consumers view and perceive new concepts such as local food (Roininen *et al.*, 2006). Individuals may attribute a variety of meanings to local food, therefore, the nature of the research question required a phenomenological approach. This approach is particularly suitable for this study as the phenomenon needs to be understood through the individuals or groups of people who would be capable of expressing or reflecting it (Creswell, 2014; Filimonau *et al*., 2017). The combination of focus groups and interviews helped to supplement the interpretation of the phenomenon (Lambert and Loiselle, 2008) and to achieve a more nuanced and complete picture through data triangulation, thus enhancing the trustworthiness of findings (Storm and Fagermoen,

2012; Miles *et al*., 2018).

In total, 48 participants were identified through purposeful sampling (personal contacts and networks established by the researchers) and the snowball technique (where focus group and interview participants recommended additional participants for the research study). Autio *et al.* (2013) suggested personal contacts and trusted referrals as a particularly suitable way to gain access to local food consumers. This method enables the researcher to select individuals who have the potential to be information rich in relation to the research area and the study being undertaken (Patton, 2015). In other words, the researchers sought to identify and select individuals or groups of individuals with knowledge and experience of the phenomena of interest (Palinkas *et al.*, 2015; Shaheen and Pradhan, 2019). The individual's knowledge around the subject and thus suitability for inclusion within the sample, was assessed prior to the commencement of each focus group and interview, where participants were asked to provide background details on their personal characteristics and demographics, and their food shopping behaviour. This acted as a check on whether respondents had at least a basic understanding of local food and were responsible for purchasing food for their household or themselves. The respondent characteristics reflected demographic factors deemed relevant to food purchasing behaviour from previous studies in the local food literature: gender, age, location, and education. Within the overall sample there was a relatively high representation of females (61%), younger participants below the age of 35 (52%), and those with a higher education qualification (54%), reflecting the typical local food buyer profile as female and college educated (Zepeda and Li, 2006). For those respondents without a formal higher education qualification, 11 (22% of the sample) had a professional qualification or industry recognized award (such as National Vocational Qualifications or 'NVQs').

The first stage of data collection consisted of focus groups designed to provide some initial

observations and to identify themes around each of the research questions, to be followed up on at the interview stage. The topics covered in the focus groups broadly explored consumers' general attitudes towards local food, their understanding of the term "local food", and the main factors influencing the local food purchase intention (see Appendix I for further details on the focus group guide). The focus groups also explored moral norms by allowing respondents to freely refer to these attributes during the discussion around motivations, attitudes towards local food (the benefits of local food consumption) and barriers to purchase. Using a focus group enables the gathering of data about opinions from people who share common interests (Collis and Hussey, 2009). The group interaction can produce data and insights that would be less accessible without the interaction found in a group (Morgan, 1988).

Five focus groups were held with four to eight participants in each group. Although the group sizes were relatively small, smaller groups are recommended when participants are likely to have a lot to say on the research topic, i.e. when they are emotionally involved with the subject matter (Morgan, 1988). In this case, the subject of local food attracted strong views and interest from respondents. A total number of 34 participants were recruited. However, four participants did not show on the day, leaving a total sample of 30 participants. The composition of the focus groups is shown in Table I. Each group consisted of a broad demographic profile.

Group interactions may lead to productive discussion as participants respond to the group moderator's questions and evaluate points made by the group. In terms of facilitation, a group interview guide was developed to create and maintain participants' interest and in order to keep the group focused on the topic in hand and to provide structure (Saunders *et al*., 2016). The topic was introduced and at the outset participants were assured that their identity would remain confidential

and were asked for their consent on the discussion being recorded (Collis and Hussey, 2009). The groups lasted on average one hour, were recorded and transcribed. A projective technique was used within the focus group discussions whereby packaging and pictures of various packaged local food products and in-store signage were shown to the participants. Packaging has previously been used as a projective tool to stimulate responses and reassociate participants with earlier experiences and memories (Harper, 2002; Mugel *et al*., 2019). This technique is commonly used in studies on food consumption and it was employed here in order to stimulate responses and clarify participants' experiences of purchasing branded local food (Holbrook, 2005). This assisted questioning on perceptions of local food and how retail signage/promotion of local food influences purchasing decisions (see Appendix I). Despite the use of branded packaged items as props, respondents took a wide perspective on local food produce, which for them included primary produce and not only branded, packaged items.

Insert Table I here

Whilst focus group discussions are able to identify principal issues, they are not able to provide the depth in relation to specific issues that can be obtained from individual interviews (Stokes and Bergin, 2006). The second stage of data collection involved 25 in-depth semi-structured one- to-one interviews. The interviews sought to further explore the themes emerging from the focus groups and more specifically sought to delve deeper into the relationships between the key influences on the local food purchase intention (RQ2) and to further explore the role of moral norms in shaping the purchase intention (RQ3). Participants were asked to explain their experiences or stories behind purchasing local food and how those experiences created an attachment towards local produce (see Appendix II for further details on the interview guide).

Moral norms were explored within several areas of questioning, where the interviewees were given the time to talk freely around moral satisfaction and moral obligation. Interviewees were specifically probed on these aspects during questions on the meaning of local food, history of attachment to local food and background experience or feelings that have influenced purchasing decisions. Thus, the semi-structured format allowed for the necessary topics to be covered but also allowed a degree of flexibility to follow up any unexpected themes that arose (Yin, 2014). The interview format also allowed for a deeper exploration of issues than was possible in focus groups.

Efforts were made to interview as many of the focus group respondents as possible, in order to further explore emerging focus group themes with these participants and in doing so obtain theoretical saturation (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Palinkas *et al*., 2015). Focus group participants were asked if they wished to participate in follow-up interviews. Despite efforts to contact all those who had agreed to participate further in the research, recruiting focus group participants for the interview stage proved problematic (12 of the original 30 participants agreed to an interview however only seven actually committed). This was mainly due to time constraints felt by the respondents and other reasons (for instance, they were travelling abroad or simply did not have sufficient interest in participating further). Nonetheless, a further 18 new participants were recruited. In comparing the demographic profiles of the focus groups and interview participants, the most notable difference was a greater gender balance at the interview stage, which reflected the research team's efforts to achieve a greater male representation within the overall sample. The focus group respondents who took part in interviews were highly engaged with the subject and thus were happy to participate further. These respondents were able to reflect on the group discussion, and refer back to the earlier responses they had given. This allowed them to expand on earlier points and to speak at length around a subject matter that was of great interest to them.

Interviews lasted typically 40-60 minutes, were recorded and transcribed. Again, the participants covered a broad demographic profile. Interviewee characteristics are detailed in Table II. The combination of focus groups and interviews allowed for data triangulation, thus enhancing the confirmability of the results, adding rigor, complexity and richness to the inquiry (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005).

Insert Table II here

The analysis of the complete dataset followed the five stages proposed in Ritchie and Spencer's (1994) analytic process (familiarisation, identifying a thematic framework, indexing, charting, mapping and interpretation) in order to achieve triangulation and to maximise trust in the validity of the study's conclusions (Miles *et al.*, 2018). The first stage familiarisation refers to the process by which the researchers familiarise themselves with the data collected to achieve an overview. This involved immersion in the data (Rubin and Rubin, 2011). The process began with the research team carrying out repeated reading of transcripts and fieldnotes from the focus groups in order to formulate relationships in the data and to inform areas for follow up at the semi-structured interview stage. The focus group discussions indicated that all participants had a basic understanding of local food and revealed the mediating role of moral aspects on consumer attitudes and purchasing intention. The analysis of the focus group data led to the identification of emerging themes for the phenomenon, which were later explored and substantiated at the interview stage. This process recommenced following completion of the interview stage, to incorporate all focus groups and interview data. At the second stage, identifying a thematic framework, efforts were made to recognise themes or issues emerging in the full set of data. The

members of the research team independently read the transcripts and developed initial coding categories. Similarities and differences across the coding categories were discussed and a final list of categories agreed upon by the research team, wherein original categories were renamed, their content modified, subdivided or replaced with new ones. Efforts were made to ensure that data were clearly associated with particular categories and that the categories were clearly defined and sufficiently distinct. The core themes then formed the basis of a thematic framework used to filter and classify the data. The analysis of data from the focus groups and interviews identified five core themes that respondents associated with local food. These themes included: *quality attributes; support for the local economy; emotional attributes; experience and familiarity; and the setting*. Moral norms attributes were observed as mediating factors cutting across these themes.

The third stage, indexing, refers to the process of identifying sections of the data which correspond to a particular theme. The transcripts were coded using the themes outlined in the thematic framework. The next stage was charting and involved arranging pieces of data according to the themes and sub themes (categories), carefully labeling to identify which source the data came from. For instance, under the "experience and familiarity" theme, a new sub theme began to emerge ("trust"), with associated labels ("safe" and "reliable"). Thus, the charting stage allowed us to delve deeper into the data by creating sub themes. The final stage, mapping and interpretation, involved analysing the key characteristics from the previous steps to interpret the data in a guided manner (Ritchie and Spencer, 2004). Also, at this stage, sense was made of the themes and how individual themes were linked together within the entire content analysis of the text. The themes emerging from the data analysis of the focus group and interview data are presented in Figure 1.

During the data analysis process a dual approach was adopted which combined the qualitative data analysis software package NVivo (10) with traditional coding materials (coloured pens, paper, and display boards). Using NVivo allowed the researchers to retrieve and organise the large volumes of data in a timely manner (Miles and Huberman, 1994) and to assist with the management and analysis of the data and the identification of core themes. Transcripts were coded more than once, which aided reflection on emerging codes. This process of analysis has been found to enable greater interpretative insight through a more rigorous analysis procedure (Maher *et al*., 2018). It allowed for a more complete set of data for interpretation than might occur when undertaking such a task manually, thus helping to ensure rigor within the analysis process (Bazeley, 2007). The process thus resulted in an in-depth consideration of the interrelationships and the intricacies of the context being studied, providing depth of meaning and richness of understanding (Erlandson *et al.*, 1993).

The following sections will present the results from the focus groups and interviews in relation to each of the three research questions. Throughout this section reference will be made to the five core themes and their associated sub-themes as presented in Figure 1. The section will begin by presenting the results derived from the focus groups that preceded and informed the interviews. Focus participants are coded as FP and interview participants as IP.

Insert Figure 1 here

Findings

Research Question 1: Consumer Meanings of Local Food

RQ1 sought to explore how respondents defined "localness" and the meanings associated with the term. The focus group discussions allowed the researchers to explore the concept in broad terms with the respondents, in order to identify thematic areas for further exploration during interviews. The discussions revealed that for the respondents within this study the meaning of local food is about more than merely distance from production to consumption. It is a multi-layered concept, with several meanings and associations. The focus group data indicated strong associations with quality credentials and the data analysis identified "quality attributes" as a core theme (See Figure 1). The notion of "quality" varied among these respondents. Respondents associated the concept of quality with freshness and nutritional aspects and believed that the key ingredients need to be generated or supplied locally: *"Local means fresh to me"* (F1P1, Urban Female); *"For me local food is a reliable indicator of freshness and quality"* (F2P1, Urban Female); *"I associate local food with freshness and freshness means much healthier food"* (F2P2, Urban Male). Respondents expressed the view that local produce represents a fresh and healthy offer given the shorter travel distance, the short aisle life and the transparency of the product origin. For these respondents the quality perception of local food is closely associated with ethical, sustainability and food waste concerns and the attractions of purchasing local food in smaller portions were noted. This was particularly the case for younger respondents: *"I am living on my own and sometimes the quantities are quite large to fit my needs''* (F1P2, Urban Female). Respondents also referred to reduced travel distance between production and consumption, leading to environmental and health benefits and a more sustainable, healthier lifestyle.

Analysis of the data from the focus group stage led to the development of a further core theme - "experience and familiarity" (see Figure 1). Familiarity with locally produced food products has a connection to place and traditions, where the place value associated with the local food products has its own meaning. As such, the term "local food" was further associated with a sense of place and an affection for foods that are produced within that place (Ilbery and Kneafsey, 1998). The sense of place relates to emotional aspects around pride in national and self-identity rather than any notion of a confined geographical boundary. Indeed, while defining "local", respondents considered local in the widest possible geographical terms to include Northern Ireland as a whole:

> *"I tend to accept that local means anything from Northern Ireland...and then more broadly from the UK. I certainly do think products that come from outside the UK are more foreign or imported, and therefore, more broadly the UK is local to me."* (F2P1, Urban Female)

While local food systems may be defined in terms of social relationships that may or may not be geographically proximate (Selfa and Qazi, 2005), from a spatial proximity perspective, the respondents' conflation of national or regional identity with local is perhaps not overly surprising given the small geographical size of the Northern Ireland market. Here, the meanings attributed to local food are directly related to the market context, reflecting a strong sense of patriotism and even a degree of ethnocentrism. Respondents believed that produce from their "place" or sense of home is something to savour, a source of pride, and a cause worth championing: "*Buying local shows that you are more patriotic, and you are committed to your own country"* (F1P2, Urban Female).

The familiarity theme was explored further during interviews where respondents were probed on

the ways in which they interpreted product familiarity. This revealed underlying emotional associations with the people, place, and produce, suggesting a sense of moral satisfaction (Arvola *et al.*, 2008) and reward linked to local food consumption. The association of local food with the core theme of "emotional attributes" (see Figure 1) provides support for previous work citing a correlation between positive emotions such as pride, and product purchase and repurchase intention (see for instance Griskevicius *et al*., 2010; Desmet, 2012). During interviews, respondents used various terms conveying emotional attributes and a connection with local food products, reflecting its multifaceted nature (Gross, 2013). Attitudes to local food are imbued with childhood memories and feelings of nostalgia. By romanticising the past, consumers are able to construct authentic experiences, recapture past feelings and construct new meanings associated with particular local food products. For example, an interviewee recounted a childhood experience around a well-known Northern Irish snack product – "Tayto Crisps". Tayto Crisps connected him with places and fun:

> *"I would remember whenever we went for school trips, we would take Tayto crisps as part of a packed lunch….just sitting on the grass and eating your crisps. It seems almost silly, but Tayto crisps have resonance with those moments."* (IP21, Urban Male)

Thus, brand meaning around this product is reconstructed from memories, emotions, and rituals associated with childhood, and heavily connected to the Northern Ireland context. This quote illustrates the importance of brand associations in creating brand meaning (Merrilees and Miller, 2016) with brand meaning being created over time from perceptual processes within the consumer's mind (Hatch and Schultz, 2010).

The interviews identified rural connections as an important sub theme of emotional attributes. Nostalgia for these respondents was often derived from their rural connections – the place where they feel they belong, the traditions they are proud of, and where meaning is embedded within the place and brands they have been exposed to since childhood. Table II shows that 13 of the 25 interview respondents in this study reside in rural areas and of these, nine participants originated from rural areas. The effects of rurality were evident regardless of whether the respondent came from a rural background or had more indirect connections through friends, relatives, or in latterly moving to a rural location. Again, the memories or experiences from the past are significant:

> *"I was not brought up in a rural area, but we have many family friends who are from farming. We spent many summers playing with friends… I played on their farm, and that is why I sort of feel half-rural. So, I do know from my childhood what farming is…."* (IP22, Rural Male)

These sentiments would again appear to hint at a sense of localness being defined in terms of psychological distance or group identity (Reich *et al*., 2018), rather than the more common association with geographical proximity.

In addition to the locational factor, there was some evidence that a second socio-demographic factor, the education level of respondents, shaped perceptions. The term "local" was viewed in slightly different ways according to the education level of respondents, providing some support for Onianwa et al. (2005) who identified education as a significant factor. Respondents with higher education qualifications were able to articulate a strong understanding of the concept of the local food system at both the individual and community levels and relate this to their purchasing

preferences. Educational attainment was strongly related to age, wherein the majority of the young independent (26-35) and young adult (36-45) age groups had higher level qualifications in contrast to the middle-aged (46-55) and older age groups where there was less interest demonstrated in purchasing locally sourced food.

Research Question 2: Interrelationships between Influences

The thematic analysis of the focus group discussions identified several factors that acted as influences on the purchase intention. As illustrated in Figure 2, these largely included a range of personal (such as quality, transparency, health benefits and sensory attributes) and altruistic (support for the local economy and environment) influences. The focus group findings identified that for these respondents purchasing local food was driven by the need for real gratification and reflected a sense of responsibility (moral obligation) towards supporting the local food economy, leading to positive emotional feelings such as pride in the local food products they consume (moral satisfaction). These values would appear to be subsumed into consumers' general feelings about local products and their support for local producer livelihoods.

Insert Figure 2 here

Quality attributes were identified as a key driver of the purchase intention where respondents spoke of the importance of superior taste and the sense of enjoyment to be had from consuming high-quality produce. Food scandals have helped to heighten consumer interest in authenticity and provenance issues and the participants in this study felt more assured about food security and safety issues when buying local produce: "*I think in relation to the recent meat scandals, there*

is a lot of scary information. So, confidence and security with purchasing local motivates me a lot" (F1P8 Urban Male). In exploring the connections between influences further, the analysis of the interview data revealed that respondents' perceptions of quality ("quality attributes") were strongly connected to "emotional attributes" (the sense of identity around the geographical designation of the product, linked to the rural connections of consumers) and "support for the local economy" (support for local producers), as illustrated in the following quote:

> *"I think the products that are produced locally are of superior quality. On the one hand, you are buying quality and on the other hand you are supporting the local community. So, there is reassurance that you are paying for a sustainable society…. When I see something is local and has not been imported thousands of miles, that would give you an extra reason to buy it…. Why would I buy beef from Argentina if I can buy it from Northern Ireland?"* (IP24, Rural Male)

The analysis identified "support for the local economy" as a further core theme (see Figure 1), where respondents on the whole indicated strong support for the local, rural economy and demonstrated altruistic motives in the belief that purchasing local produce would help the community, assist local employment and preserve local livelihoods, culture and traditions: *"Farmers are part of our culture, and therefore, it supports cultures and supports jobs. It is supporting community, and it is very important to retain that"* (F1P3, Rural Female). Childhood memories inculcated a strong affinity towards the local food community, which in turn stimulated the purchase intention: "*I was brought up in the countryside and have seen the trouble farmers have in producing food for us….so I've always felt a certain affinity towards the local community, and I try to help as much as possible"* (IP19, Urban Male).

This level of community support was also reflected in the importance that respondents placed on the setting or store environment for local food consumption. The "setting" is identified as a core theme (see Figure 1) supporting the creation of positive experiences and familiarity ("experience and familiarity"). For the participants in this study, the setting within which food is sold creates an ambience that increases trust and consumer confidence. Within specialist outlets or farmers' markets there is an opportunity for social interaction where consumers can engage with the farmer/producer within that marketplace, engendering an emotional response: *"a pleasurable experience"* (F3P5, Rural Female); *"I do not feel I have that connection when I purchase it from the superstore"* (F4P3, Rural Female). Respondents valued the personal interaction with the producer in helping to build their trust. This is reflective of a strong social relationship between the consumer and producer (Smithers *et al.*, 2008; Weiss, 2011), where economic behaviour is embedded in a social context or in a network of relationships, shaped by social fabric, norms and routines (Granovetter, 1985; Uzzi, 1996). The interview responses identified that trust develops from the individual's sense of safety and reliability, the actor's (producer/seller) product knowledge, the ambience around the store environment and their ability to tell the story behind the produce.

In contrast, within the conventional multiple store setting, there was a tendency to be skeptical towards unfamiliar labels and general claims. While respondents were guided by the packaging and retail signage and were able to take some assurance from the operator's local food credentials on this, the majority of respondents displayed a high degree of disconnection with store posters and a level of cynicism around slogans such as "farm fresh" and "Northern Ireland produce". Thus, it would appear that consumer exposure to product information influences attitudes toward unfamiliar local products (Cohen and Avieli, 2004) and that there is strong value in informational familiarity as a selling point (Govers *et al.*, 2007; Stolzenbach *et al.*, 2013). At a deeper level, the

degree of cynicism towards the multiples' local food credentials may be reflective of increased consumer interest in, and a growing demand for, specialist, local food products within the Northern Ireland market context, as a response to a myriad of food scares over many years, and concerns around food security (Mintel, 2016).

Research Question 3: Moral Norms and their Impact on Purchase Intention within the Local Food Context

RQ3 sought to explore the impact of moral norms on purchase intention. In broad terms, our analysis identified that the local food purchase is driven by the need for real gratification, pride and sense of responsibility (moral obligation and moral satisfaction), leading to positive emotional feelings towards local produce. These values would appear to be subsumed into consumers' general feelings about local products and their support for local producer livelihoods. Respondents' strong support for the local, rural economy and altruistic motives reflected an underlying moral imperative and sense of responsibility that directly influenced the purchase intention:

> *"I morally think that it is my responsibility to support the local economy and many of my friends are all farmers and guys who I know a long time. Therefore, I do make an effort to buy from the source. Because I believe the larger supermarkets exploit them."* (F1P3, Rural Female)

Here, moral feelings associated with responsibility, guilt and the moral obligation of purchasing local food are highlighted, as both rural and urban based respondents reflected on their sense of responsibility when they do not support local produce: "*I do not feel good. It feels wrong"* (F5P1,

Rural Male)*; "I started to feel awful"* (F4P4, Urban Female); "*I feel guilty doing that"* (F5P5, Urban Female)*; "It comes down to our responsibility"* (F2P4, Rural Male)*; **"…**if I cannot buy fresh veg or meat for cooking it feels wrong…"* (F5P1, Rural Male); *"It is so easy to get local food now and if we cannot get it then I feel awful"* (F4P4, Urban Female). A further exploration of feelings of guilt with the interview participants signaled guilt arising from concerns around food waste and the quality of convenience foods when local food was not consumed. In such cases, participants expressed guilt in buying conventional food products, which represented a decision that they made against their principles. Focus group respondents expressed feelings of satisfaction and well-being in relation to local food consumption and the associated food quality ("*I do feel happy when I purchase local because you enjoy the quality"* F3P1, Rural Male). This theme was observed to a greater degree during the interview stage where the findings indicated that more self-gratifying benefits dominate consumer purchasing decisions (Weatherell *et al*., 2003; Sefang, 2006; Murphy, 2011; Knight, 2013). The thematic analysis identified words and phrases that interview participants used to describe their moral feelings and these included terms such as "social pride" and "empathy", which suggests the existence of moral satisfaction and a sense of gratification and reward (see Figure 3).

A response from one interviewee highlighted a slightly more nuanced position on moral norms in that the nature of the key driver (moral obligation or moral satisfaction) *"...depends on the day and your mood and emotions on that particular day..."* (IP21, Urban Male). In a number of cases, a pragmatic outlook was displayed by respondents in that showing support for local food was not a purely selfless and wholly altruistic act. Rather, a degree of reciprocity and sharing of benefits between producer and consumer was expected:

"It is a relationship you build with the person and the product and as a customer you will obviously go back there because there is a mutual benefit for the local producers as well as us. Therefore, to me it is more about being good and staying healthy rather than moral obligation." (IP22, Rural Male)

The pragmatic outlook was also evident through the attitudes displayed towards price in a number of interviewee responses. For example, the cost of buying local ingredients was calculated against ready-made meals and the expense in eating out. There was also a concern that failure to support local food production was in a sense self-defeating, in that the demise of the local food economy would lead to greater imports and higher prices.

Insert Figure 3 here

Further socio-demographic analysis of the interview data revealed that there is a strong correlation between respondents' moral and ethical views and their rural connections through their background. This includes not only rural based consumers but those with more indirect connections through friends, relatives, or in latterly moving to a rural location. For these respondents, local food produce represents a traditional way of life and in purchasing local food support is provided for such values (Telligman *et al*., 2017). The rural background and connections of respondents in this study and their exposure to local produce and producers through their social networks helped to create a community spirit ethos which is translated into support for the local economy, influenced in more practical terms by easier access to specialist local food destinations such as farmers' markets (Abello *et al*., 2014). The rural connection thus helps to foster a degree of moral satisfaction.

Discussion

This study sought to address a gap in knowledge on the influences on consumer purchase intention for local food and raised questions as to what local food might mean for consumers, beyond the binary influences of local support and personal/altruistic and ethical factors in the local food purchasing decision. The theoretical and practical implications of the findings will be discussed next. The paper will conclude by considering areas for future research.

Theoretical Implications

The first research question addressed consumer meanings of local food. The findings extend understanding and make a theoretical contribution by revealing several higher order themes that convey the meanings attributed to the term "local food" (quality, experience and familiarity, emotional attributes, the setting, and support for the local economy) and considers how these connect with moral aspects. Thus, a more complex and richer characterization of local food purchasing is presented. The findings illustrate how consumers associate socio-emotional aspects, where local food is an emotion-laden product that can serve as a stimuli that elicits specific positive emotions (Griskevicius *et al.*, 2010); a pleasurable experience, associated with a range of emotional attributes (pride, identity, sense of belonging, nostalgia, rural connections) that are connected to these higher order themes. For these respondents the food product has a specific meaning which defines their identity. The findings support prior research by Hingley *et al.* (2010) and Alonso *et al.* (2011), which suggested that consumers naturally feel a connection with local food produce through closer contact with the producer, where the sensory attributes of the food are amplified by the producer-consumer interaction.

In addressing the second research question, the findings indicate that a mutual reciprocity exists between various influential factors, resulting in a complex and rich characterisation of the factors influencing the local food purchase. This study therefore progresses knowledge beyond the binary personal/self-interest and social/altruistic categorizations, which were the focus of previous studies, to provide a deeper understanding of the interconnectedness of influences on the local food purchase intention. The findings support Megicks et al.'s (2012) conclusion that intrinsic product quality and local support and provenance are significant predictors in purchasing local food, and that they are co-related. Previous studies have suggested that experience with products affects consumer attitudes and should be considered in defining familiarity (Alba and Hutchinson, 1987; Rao and Sieben, 1992). The findings from this study provide support for the argument that familiarity with the product, the producer and place enhance consumer confidence. Familiarity has two dimensions – informational and experiential (Alba and Hutchinson, 1987; Baloglu, 2001). In support of Stolzenbach *et al.* (2013), the findings demonstrate the importance of experimental familiarity in that when consumers are familiar with aspects of local food the greater the confidence they have in consuming that product. Consequently, increasing familiarity through direct or indirect past food experience could potentially decrease the perceived risk or tension consumers may feel in consuming that food (Gafen, 2000, Schiffman and Kanuk, 2007). However, in contrast to Seo *et al.*'s work (2013), there was no evidence from the current study that experiential familiarity is more influential than informational familiarity. Therefore, the findings make a further theoretical contribution to the local food purchasing literature by revealing that both informational and experiential familiarity impact upon consumer preferences and the intention to consume local food.

The findings give an insight into consumer attitudes towards the features of the local food setting

that trigger an emotional response and behavioural intentions. The setting not only influences consumer perceptions of quality but also influences the meanings consumers draw from the many intangible, contextual and symbolic elements linked to the setting. This theme has connotations of the notion of embeddedness, which emphasizes the role of social relations in generating trust, which is necessary for any economic transactions to take place (Granovetter, 1985). However, within the context of local food, and based on the findings presented here, the notion of embeddedness is limited in explaining the scope of influences on the purchase intention. Thus, a further contribution to emerge from our findings is the need for a broader conceptualization of embeddedness within this context. In the case of local food, the servicescape concept (Booms and Bitner, 1981; Bitner, 1992) has some value in helping to deepen understanding of the embeddedness concept.

The third research question explored the role of morality within the local food context. The findings support previous research that has identified an association between local food purchasing and moral and ethical attitudes (Honkanen *et al.*, 2006; Dean *et al.*, 2008; Alam and Sayuti, 2011; O'Connor *et al*., 2017). In broad terms, the findings contradict Eckhardt *et al*.'s study (2010) which suggested that using moral appeals to provoke ethical consumption behaviour is unlikely to work. It would appear that moral obligation is a mediating factor. Participants expressed their feelings of guilt for buying conventional food products, which is a decision that they made against their principles. This finding contradicts the argument put forward by Peterson (2012) that local food consumption is a contingent good and signals the individual's environmental credentials but falls short of being a moral obligation. The purchasing decision for our respondents derives from a feeling of responsibility for retaining the local economy. In relation to this theme, the meanings associated with local food do not only pertain to a form of defensive

localism (Dupuis and Goodman, 2005) or consumer ethnocentrism (Fernandez-Ferrin, 2018), or loyalty towards a geographical locality, but is indicative of a form of moral economy and cultural psyche where people well-being represents a core value. There are some parallels here to themes identified in the material culture literature, for instance around the concept of sacrifice discussed in Miller's (1998) work, whereby the food shopper for the household is giving something of themselves for the greater good.

While the purchase intention represents a desire to satisfy emotional needs driven by feelings of moral obligation in helping the local economy and society, our findings indicate that moral feelings towards purchasing local food products are driven by something more positive. For this group of respondents, purchasing local food is the right thing to do for them, in order to satisfy emotional needs. The findings thus suggest that moral satisfaction has the ability to influence consumers' local food purchasing intention and their overall behaviour. Similarly, Bratanova *et al.* (2015) found that moral satisfaction leads to stronger purchase intention effects. Our study thus adds to knowledge and extends models of local food consumption, through the identification of moral satisfaction as a prominent influence on attitudes and purchase intention, more so than moral obligation and feelings of guilt.

The findings provide some deeper insights into the nature of moral satisfaction connected to the socio-demographic factor of location. They suggest that the theme of moral satisfaction is prevalent among the urban populace who have a lived experience of rural areas and who are deeply attached to the place. This contradicts the belief that urban consumers are generally less predisposed towards local food than their rural counterparts, due to accessibility issues. Previous studies have found that rural consumers give higher priority to civic issues than urban consumers

(see for instance Weatherell *et al.*, 2003). We make a theoretical contribution here by revealing a more finely balanced rural/urban divide, as opposed to a clear rural-urban dichotomy, in that we identify a group of consumers with varying rural connections. Overall, our findings suggest that location has a particularly strong impact on consumer perceptions of local food and their decision-making when compared to other commonly used variables such as gender, age and education. Thus, the findings advance knowledge on the role of personal characteristics beyond the existing, widely used socio-demographic variables.

Practical Implications

There are a number of practical implications for marketers from this study that provide considerable scope to differentiate local food products. A more nuanced understanding of consumer motivations and perceptions will help marketers to develop brand image linked to the themes identified here. This leads to several specific recommendations. First, marketers should take account of how consumer sentiments towards local food are framed in terms of group identity and a sense of place that derives in great part from rural connections that help to foster emotional responses, such as feelings of nostalgia and affinity, where meaning is embedded within familiar places and brands. In respect to familiarity, marketers should give equal attention to informational and experiential dimensions.

Second, the findings suggest a strong need for local food marketers to focus on the creation of a servicescape or setting that meets consumer expectations. The setting should be managed carefully to construct an emotional attachment and positive consumer experience through sensory appeal, whilst promoting trust and perceptions of quality. Indeed, retailers, producers and

farmers should look beyond traditional settings to establish various service interaction facilities and a variety of possible engagement platforms where value could be co-created in a flexible manner.

Third, the findings suggest that marketing campaigns should give more consideration in advertising messages to moral satisfaction and attributes associated with moral norms that invoke the power of positive consumer emotions, rather than more negative associations and emotions such as guilt. The extent to which consumers make decisions based on positive emotions such as pride and a sense of fulfilment and satisfaction from supporting the local community, in relation to feelings of obligation, guilt and sense of responsibility, should again be valuable to marketers seeking to gain a deeper understanding of the drivers for local food purchasing. This would allow marketers to refine communications for stronger impacts on ethical consumption behaviour, and in so doing contribute to the sustainable development agenda and associated targets under the UN's Sustainable Development Goals, particularly in relation to sustainable consumption.

Future Research

The paper concludes by considering some areas for future research. At the outset, this paper argued for a deeper understanding of the interconnectedness of influences on the local food purchase intention and a progression of knowledge beyond existing binary categorisations. The findings from the current study provide more insight into the interplay between the various influences and present a rich characterisation of the factors that influence the local food purchase. Future studies should utilise research designs and methodologies that would allow researchers to extend understanding of the complex relationships between influences and to further explore the

strength of the higher order themes identified here. It would be particularly interesting to further explore the role and impact of rural connections, specifically in terms of consumer constructions of their relationship with rurality, its associated products and traditions, and how this transmits into purchasing intention. This would advance knowledge on the role of personal characteristics beyond the existing, widely used socio-demographic variables of gender, age and education.

The role of moral norms in relation to local food consumption requires much more attention in future studies. A deeper examination of how ethical consumption behaviour is driven by the interplay of these attributes, with a focus on the relative power of moral satisfaction and moral obligation, warrants investigation. The future research agenda, as outlined, would make a valuable contribution towards the UN's Sustainable Development Goals, in relation to sustainable consumption and food production systems, with a particular contribution to targets on the productivity of small-scale food producers, resilient agricultural practices and food security.

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