



Consumers' perceptions and preferences for local food: A review



Corinna Feldmann*, Ulrich Hamm

Department of Food and Agricultural Marketing, Faculty of Organic Agricultural Sciences, University of Kassel, Germany

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ABSTRACT

This article reviews the scientific literature on local food from the consumer's perspective and analyses findings through the application of the Alphabet Theory – a newly developed theoretical framework for consumer behavior towards alternative food choices. As consumers' interest in local food has steadily increased in the past fifteen years, so has the number of research studies on consumers' attitudes and purchase behavior with regard to local food.

A literature search was carried out on three online catalogues using the search terms 'local', 'regional', 'food', and 'consumer'. Only articles published in English and from January 2000 until January 2014 were taken into account. In all, the literature search returned 550 scientific articles. This paper provides an overview of 73 relevant publications, summarizes the main results, and identifies research gaps in the context of the Alphabet Theory.

One major result was that, unlike organic food, local food is not perceived as expensive. Nevertheless, consumers are willing to pay a premium for local food. In mostly quantitative studies, consumer characteristics, attitudes, and purchase behaviors with regard to local food were assessed. Research gaps were identified in various areas: cross-national (cultural) comparisons, influence of different types of products (fresh vs. non-perishable, processed vs. non-processed, or plant vs. animal products), origin of foodstuffs used to produce local food as well as the influence of personal and social norms on the formation of attitudes towards local food. This contribution appears to be the first review of scientific articles from the field of local food consumption to present an overview on international research and to identify research gaps.

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* Corresponding author at: Faculty of Organic Agricultural Sciences, University of Kassel, Steinstraße 19, D-37213 Witzenhausen, Germany. Tel.: +49 5542 98 1239.

E-mail address: c.feldmann@uni-kassel.de (C. Feldmann).

Introduction

Consumers question food production practices and demand greater transparency in the supply chain because the distances between place of production and place of consumption have grown larger and become increasingly nontransparent (La Trobe & Acott, 2000). Many consumers have reoriented themselves towards local food, i.e. food that has traveled only short distances or towards food that is marketed directly by the producer (Holloway et al., 2007; Watts, Ilbery, & Maye, 2005).

At the outset, the development of local food did not increase due to a growing demand by consumers, but rather because of government attempts to strengthen their local economies. Brown and Miller (2008) state that the primarily supply-led increase in local food marketing has been recognized and adopted by consumers as an option for the consumption of alternatively produced food. Especially in the USA, state governments introduced programs to support small-scale local farmers and the marketing of state-grown products. In addition, the implementation of farmers' markets was promoted to establish producer–consumer relationships and to raise consumers' awareness of food origin. While the development of local farmers' markets in the USA peaked in the 1990's, in Europe, this development took place approximately one decade later (Vecchio, 2009). In Europe, the reason behind the reintroduction of the farmers' markets was not the promotion of local commodities, but rather the demand for traditional foods and the manifest consumer interest in the various food quality attributes associated with local food (Vecchio, 2009).

In the USA and Europe alike, the globalization of food production and supply chains, the concentration of processes in food production and a number of food scandals have led to consumer demand for greater transparency and information on food origin. The increasing number of concerned consumers resulted in the development of more and more alternative food networks, e.g. Slowfood, Locavores, community supported agriculture (CSA), among others (Jones, Comfort, & Hillier, 2004). In parallel, some supermarket chains in the USA and Europe have begun to market local foods to meet consumer demands.

Research has been carried out to address the increasing consumer demand for locally produced food and to understand their attitudes and purchase decisions (Holloway et al., 2007; Ilbery, Morris, Buller, Maye, & Kneafsey, 2005). Over the past decade, the number of scientific journal articles on this topic has grown steadily, reflecting the relevance of this field of research (Watts et al., 2005). In particular, the identification of preferences and underlying food values is very important as it can help to improve food marketing, communication, and policy making. Numerous scientific studies have been published on the concept of local food, consumer perceptions and their willingness-to-pay for local food.

Consumers' reasons for choosing local products and their attitudes towards locally produced food are manifold. While some consumers criticize the increasing quantity of imports in the national food market and regard local food as a more environmentally and climate friendly alternative, other consumers view local food from a rather hedonistic viewpoint as fresher, safer and healthier than imported products. Since there is not one single, uniform definition of the term 'local' and no governmental regulation, consumers and producers have very different perceptions of what the description 'local food' implies. Depending on the interest of individual consumers, the seeking out of information and consumer knowledge of local food influences their attitudes and translates into purchase behavior. Likewise, demographics, contextual factors, and habits interact with consumers' food purchase behavior (cf. Zepeda & Deal, 2009).

We carried out a literature review to generate an overview of the most important and recurrent results and to reveal trends in local food research. To achieve a holistic picture of local food purchase behavior and consumers' attitudes, we adopted the Alphabet Theory from Zepeda and Deal (2009). In this way, we organized the key findings to identify the main factors and relations that influenced local food purchases. Furthermore, we aimed to reveal those areas of interest that have not been well documented yet.

This work is structured as follows: the next chapter addresses the theoretical model on which this contribution is based. The subsequent chapter gives details on the methodological approach used for the literature search, followed by an overview of the studies included in the review. The results section is divided into six parts following the main components of the Alphabet Theory. The first part deals with the varying definitions of 'local' in the context of food. The second part addresses the influence of demographics on attitude formation towards local food. The third part covers both information seeking and knowledge, as they are closely related in their influence on attitudes. The fourth component of the Alphabet Theory is context, which relates to attitudes as well as behavior. The fifth part is about attitudes, which are discussed with reference to the Value–Belief–Norm (VBN) Theory; VBN Theory is built on a causal link between values, beliefs, and norms. The last part then deals with actual consumer behavior resulting from all the components mentioned above. This review closes with conclusions drawn from the findings of these studies and the application of the theoretical framework. Recommendations for further research are presented. Tables including all studies that are part of this review are shown in the annex (see Tables 1–3).

Theoretical model: Alphabet Theory

Alphabet Theory was chosen as a framework for this review because it includes elements and interactions which have been found to be essential in describing local food consumption. The interactions between the different elements of the Alphabet Theory reveal especially interesting insights which might otherwise have remained undiscovered. The theoretical model combined with the key findings from the literature review help to draw a consistent and detailed picture of local food consumption and its formation as well as the gap between consumers' attitudes and their purchase behavior.

Alphabet Theory combines the VBN Theory (Stern, Dietz, Abel, Guagnano, & Kalof, 1999) and the ABC Theory (Guagnano, Stern, & Dietz, 1995) (Fig. 1). Zepeda and Deal (2009) merged them and added knowledge (K), information seeking (IS), habit (H), and demographic data (D) in order to better understand consumer choices.

Zepeda and Deal (2009) successfully applied the Alphabet Theory to determine consumer motivations for purchasing organic and local food and concluded that the combination of VBN Theory and ABC Theory is very valuable in predicting consumers' food purchasing behavior. They also found that the additional elements

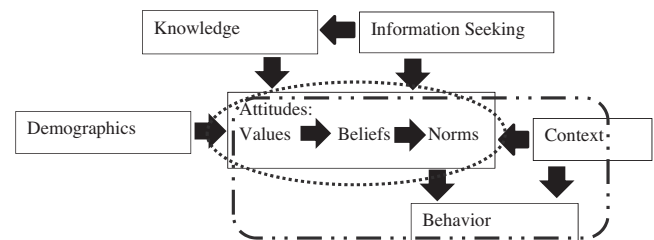


Fig. 1. Alphabet Theory from Zepeda and Deal (2009), adapted. (.....VBN Theory, ———ABC Theory).

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