

Food ‘localness’: A systematic literature review

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Abstract

Food ‘localness’ is a crucial driver for consumers’ choices at an international level. A growing body of marketing research focuses on local food consumption, and public policy is increasingly interested in sustainable local food systems. However, what makes food ‘local’ has yet to be defined. Indeed, the local food concept is subjective and bears different meanings. In this paper, we aim to bring clarity to the vagueness concerning the local food concept by conducting a systematic literature review of the marketing literature focusing on local food consumption. We selected 92 articles published between 1998 and 2021. Assisted by qualitative content analysis, we have integrated, interpreted, and synthesised the findings through a thematic organisation of the main research strands, and mapped the current status of knowledge on food localness. We have individuated seven interconnected themes, such as *(i)* consumption drivers; *(ii)* farmers’ markets; *(iii)* geographical indication (GI); *(iv)* global vs. local; *(v)* locavorism; *(vi)* organic vs. local; *(vii)* sustainability. Our findings suggest that food ‘localness’ should not only be promoted through the indication of a geographical reference. From a consumer perspective, its understanding lies in the embeddedness of a consumer or product in the landscape and/or culture of a given place/territory, as well as on consumers’ identity construction in the face of globalisation and sustainability issues. Future research should extend findings and include studies from other disciplines. Marketing managers should enhance consumers’ local (vs. global) identity through products’ ‘localness’ authenticity.

Keywords: Local food consumption; Localness; Systematic literature review; Qualitative content analysis

Introduction

Food ‘localness’ is an increasingly crucial driver for consumers’ choices at an international level. Furthermore, the sustainability and resilience of local food systems in the face of the economic downturn caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has vindicated its relevance from a public policy perspective (EU Commission, 2020).

Even though much is already known regarding the factors influencing local food purchase (Feldmann & Hamm, 2015), what makes food ‘local’ remains substantially indiscernible. In fact, the local food concept is subjective, and brings a plurality of meanings with it (Bingen et al., 2011). For instance, consumers may assume that local food is ‘organic’ *per se* (Frank & Brock, 2019), or that local food is ‘typical’ of a place/territory (Gerosa, 2021), and hence an instance of those products having a geographical indication (GI) label (Camillo & Di Pietro, 2015). This conceptual ambiguity makes the broader category of local food products unrecognisable objectively – an issue not only affecting consumers (Lang et al., 2014), but also marketers and policymakers promoting the ‘localness’ of food systems (Jackson et al., 2021).

In this paper, we aim to bring clarity to the vagueness afflicting the local food concept. We systematically reviewed the way(s) in which food ‘localness’ (namely the quality of food to be defined as ‘local’) had been conceptualised in the marketing literature. By means of qualitative content analysis (Finfgeld-Connett, 2014), we analysed studies on local food consumption and asked, “How does the marketing literature make sense of food ‘localness’?”. Hence, we mapped the status of knowledge on food ‘localness’, wishing to inform future marketing research.

This paper is structured as follows. We describe the methodology used for conducting this systematic literature review (henceforth, SLR). Finally, we report our main findings, discuss them, and present the limitations, future research developments, and managerial implications.

Method

We carried out an online search to identify the marketing literature focusing on local food consumption. This search was conducted in September 2021. This study followed the procedures standardly used in SLRs (Paul et al., 2021). In particular, we used three major electronic databases (*EBSCOhost*, *Scopus*, and *Web of Science*), and applied a five-steps approach to records retrieval.

First of all, we analysed the most relevant and frequently used author-supplied keywords. Thus, we defined our string of keywords by applying Boolean conditions as follows (Silchenko & Askegaard, 2020):

(*typic* or local**) *and* (*food or nutrition or eating or diet*) *and* (*consum**) *and* (*marketing or advertising or communication or promotion or claim or label or brand* or halo*).¹

Secondly, we limited our search to scientific articles published in journals, written in the English language, and belonging to the subject area of the social sciences. This allowed us to exclude works in the areas of clinical psychology, medicine, and the natural sciences. Thirdly, we followed Silchenko and Askegaard’s (2020) example and limited our search to journals included in the *ABS 2021* and/or the *ABDC 2019* scoring at least moderately on citation based rankings (*SJR* > 0.400 and/or *H-Index* > 20). This allowed us to focus only on those articles that circulate significantly more among marketing researchers due to disciplinary boundaries (Silchenko & Askegaard, 2020). Thus, we retrieved a total of 875 records, excluding

¹ The keyword ‘*typic**’ (e.g., ‘typical’, ‘typicality’, etc.) was added to avoid excluding research studying regional and specialty food products. Indeed, the reference to a place/territory is increasingly implied in the term ‘typical’ in the food domain (Gerosa, 2021). We did not include the term ‘organic’ because organic food (*i*) does not necessarily imply a ‘place/territory’; (*ii*) is a substitute of ‘local’ food in decision settings (Frank & Brock, 2019).

duplicates. Fourthly, we have excluded those records that were (i) non-consumer market studies; (ii) non-food studies; (iii) off-topic or inconclusive. This left us with 440 records. Fifthly, considering the nature of this paper, we further limited our search to those records published in journals appearing in the ‘marketing’ subject category of the *SJR: Scientific Journal Ranking 2020*, thus remaining with 154 records. From this dataset, we selected 92 records – published between 1998 and 2021 – depending on their degree of fit with our research question.

We adopted qualitative content analysis (henceforth, QCA) to interpret the findings. QCA is a flexible data analysis method aimed at integrating, interpreting and synthesizing qualitative evidence, such as text, “for purposes of conducting knowledge-building and theory-generating qualitative systematic reviews” (Finfgeld-Connett, 2014, p. 342). The coding of the records into themes followed our research question. After developing an inductive coding scheme, each code was sorted into seven interconnected themes, each representing a strand of research on local food consumption, which we interpreted as follows (Table 1).

Themes	Number of records
<i>Consumption drivers</i>	27
<i>Farmers' markets</i>	9
<i>Geographical indication (GI)</i>	11
<i>Global vs. local</i>	13
<i>Locavorism</i>	3
<i>Organic vs. local</i>	9
<i>Sustainability</i>	20
Total	92

Table 1. Thematic organisation of the records.

Discussion of the findings

In this section, we will provide a short description of the themes resulting from the QCA.

1. Consumption drivers. Research on local food consumption drivers has focused on exploring, analysing, and testing consumers’ motives, attitudes, intentions, and willingness to pay for locally grown/produced products. Attributes, such as ‘location’, ‘quality’, and ‘premium price’ are among the most salient characteristics of local food. Credence goods intangible attributes, such as ‘naturalness’, ‘healthiness’, ‘seasonality’, ‘freshness’, and food ‘safety’, are also crucial characteristics of local food products, determining their purchase and consumption. However, what does ‘local’ mean to respondents of these studies? Food is ‘local’ if it travelled for less than 20 miles from production sites (Byrd et al., 2018), or if it was distributed within an 85 miles radius (Ridley et al., 2014) Moreover, the meaning of ‘local’ is associated with the ideas of rurality and ‘village’, as well as with ‘shared landscape’ and ‘terroir’ (Rodriguez, 2020). Food traceability, especially for meat, is a crucial driver of local food purchase, and local food products are perceived as being more easily accessible to rural (rather than urban) consumers for proximity reasons (Khan & Prior, 2016) – however, this is open to debate (Czarnecki et al., 2021). Even though the role of ‘culture’ is not addressed as much as the role of ‘geographical proximity’ by studies under this theme, consumers’ identification with a ‘nation’ and/or region is often reported as a relevant driver of local food consumption. To this regard, consumers’ ethnocentrism and sense of community particularly stand out (Aprile et al., 2015; Tomić & Alfnes, 2018). Consumers support for local food producers and abidance by subjective and social norms are also often cited as drivers of local food consumption (Kuma & Smith, 2018). However, some studies argue against this finding (Bianchi, 2017), and claim that subjective and social norms are not relevant in the context of local food consumption (Campbell, 2013; Shin et al., 2016).

2. Farmers’ markets. Although various direct marketing channels for local food products exist, farmers’ markets are the most popular ones among our findings. Farmers’ markets

distinguish themselves from mainstream/conventional marketing channels, such as supermarkets, in that they circumvent intermediaries. There, consumers can buy produce directly from local producers, thus reducing the perceived gap between the two (La Trobe, 2001). Our findings show that consumers increasingly seek local food at farmers' markets because of their perceived congruity of values with local food intangible attributes (Gumirakiza et al., 2017; Murphy, 2011). Indeed, these studies consider farmers' markets as a means to express the values that are typically associated with the local food concept through consumers' choices (Carey et al., 2011). Studies under this theme have contributed to the conceptualisation of food 'localness' by grounding local food consumption in products' territorial embeddedness, and consumers' pro-social (i.e., communal, cooperative) behaviour. In particular, the respondents of these studies visited farmers' markets to support *their* local economy, and expressed this intention by consuming locally sourced food (Feagan & Morris, 2009; Garner, 2017; McEachern et al., 2010), while looking for authentic purchase and consumption experiences (Dodds & Holmes, 2017).

3. Geographical indication (GI). Place-based promotion of food products, implemented via the application of labelling schemes (Paulin et al., 2018), creates competitive advantage for local food products at the international level, especially considering the role of globalisation (Tootelian & Segale, 2004). In particular, the food coming from the same region where consumers live tend to be preferred to food from 'outside', despite geographical indication (GI) labelling (Perito et al., 2019). This may be due to consumers' identification of themselves with the 'in-group' of their region of residence (Panzone et al., 2016). GI labelling schemes ground themselves in the connection of food to a locality and to traditional methods of production (Dimara & Skuras, 2005). GI products are found to improve local food systems (Likoudis et al., 2016), and signal the same values that consumers usually ascribe to local food products (Bosworth et al., 2015). Indeed, they are 'typical' food belonging to the cultural heritage of a place (Camillo & Di Pietro, 2015). However, it must be noted that not all local food products are GI labelled or certified (EU Commission, 2020).

4. Global vs. local. Studies under this theme focus on the socio-cultural component of local food consumption. More particularly, they investigate, analyse, and test 'localness' by focusing on the contraposition between the 'local' and the 'global'. Studies under this theme draw their main arguments from the relationship between the global market (e.g., globalisation, global consumer culture), and local consumers' identity perception and construction. They focus on the connection between 'local' food products and other concepts, such as 'authenticity', 'tradition', and 'nostalgia'. In particular, studies focusing on the 'authenticity' of localness and local 'iconness' found that marketing managers may enhance the perceived 'local' authenticity of brands or products by means of mere top-down marketing tactics (Hoskins et al., 2020; Özsomer, 2012; Riefler, 2020). The activation of a local (vs. global) brand and/or product identity is profitable, in that it tends to lead consumers into impulsive buying (De Vries & Fennis, 2020), as well as making sacrifices more accessible and salient to them (Gao et al., 2018). Ethnocentrism is cited as one of the main attributes of local food consumption driven by local identity perceptions (Tellstrom et al., 2006). Askegaard and Madsen (1998) found that European consumers of different nationalities delimit food localness within national boundaries. Moreover, although local food consumption is seen for the most part as a form of 'resistance' to the global, corporate agri-food system (Seubsman et al., 2009), several studies criticised the 'alternativeness' of local food products and consumption by providing evidence of the fact that global consumer culture and capitalism have devoured regionalisms and localisms (Askegaard & Kjeldgaard, 2007; Gerosa, 2021; Sobol et al., 2018).

5. Locavorism. Locavores are defined as consumers who (i) purchase locally grown produce (Stanton et al., 2012); (ii) prefer proximity marketing channels that distribute locally sourced seasonal food (Spielmann & Barnelin, 2015); (iii) embody an ideology grounded in the 'lionization' (i.e., superiority) of local (vs. non-local) food, 'opposition' to long-distance supply chains, and 'communalization' of food systems (Reich et al., 2018). In particular, these studies conceptualise food 'localness' in terms of geographical proximity (Reich et al., 2018). Reich et al. (2018) suggest that the 'psychological distance' and 'group identity' of locavores should be further investigated, especially considering locavores' positive relationship with ethnocentrism.

Considering that literature on the relationship between local food consumption and psychological distance, identity, and ethnocentrism already exist (e.g., Aprile et al., 2015; Panzone et al., 2016; Tellstrom et al., 2006; Tomić & Alfnes, 2018), we have grouped studies dealing with locavorism under an *ad hoc* theme. Thus, we want to highlight the fact that research on locavores is (apparently) detached from other research on (and conceptualisations of) local food.

6. Organic vs. local. The marketing literature on organic vs. local food is vast, considering that (i) research studying organic food purchase and consumption has often intersected with local food perception and preference (Howard & Allen, 2006); (ii) local food and organic food are found to be substitutes (Frank & Brock, 2019). Considering the local-organic food ‘competitive’ relationship, Denver et al. (2019) segment organic and local food consumers as follows: (i) the organically-locally committed favouring direct sales; (ii) the price-insensitive locally minded; (iii) the vaguely locally minded; (iv) the uninterested and price-sensitive; (v) the organically-locally inclined favouring small producers. Studies under this theme suggest that food ‘localness’ is preferred to food ‘organicness’ (Frank & Brock, 2019; Hempel & Hamm, 2016). In particular, according to Denver et al. (2019), consumers preferring local to organic food generally value the geographical proximity of producers positively. Instead, strict organic food consumers are found to be mainly interested in food ‘naturalness’ and animal welfare (Hasselbach & Roosen, 2016), and also in healthiness, hedonism, environmental friendliness, and food safety (Bauer et al., 2013). However, consumers tend to ascribe these same attributes to local food products as well, even though organic food products are recognisable objectively due to the ‘organic’ food certification/label (Frank & Brock, 2019).

7. Sustainability. Local food consumption has tended to be studied by positing the (background) assumption that local food products have ethical, green, and sustainable values (Tanner & Wölfling Kast, 2003). For instance, many articles under this theme (and beyond, e.g., Frank & Brock, 2019, and McEachern et al., 2010) study the relationship between local food consumption and sustainability through the construct of the ‘mindful’ or ‘conscious’ consumer (Birch et al., 2018; Mattioni & Caraher, 2018). However, Megicks et al. (2012) suggest that, while it is clear that consumers buying local food care about local producers (Tregear & Ness, 2005), local food consumption is not actually positively related with wider ethical and sustainability issues. Forms of consumption benefiting local food producers economically have nevertheless shown to enhance both the social welfare of a community and environmental sustainability. For instance, Kessari et al. (2020) find in collective farmer shops – i.e., small sales outlets managed by groups of local farmers – the possibility to achieve both social and economic performance through: (i) cooperation; (ii) collective governance; (iii) clear communication on alternative production/distribution; (iv) territorial embeddedness. In this respect, several authors claim that sustainability in the food domain can and should be reached through the ‘political engineering’ of alternative marketing channels in the territory (La Velley et al., 2021), and consumer ‘resistance’ to conventional consumption (Leipamaa-Leskinen, 2021). In conclusion, trust in producers and retailers, and food products’ ‘localness’ credibility are crucial in the marketing of local food as ‘sustainable’ food products (Garner, 2019; Kessari et al., 2020; Mattioni & Caraher, 2018; Moruzzi & Sirieix, 2015; Saraiva et al., 2021).

Conclusion

In this paper, we reviewed the marketing literature on local food consumption. We conducted a SLR by asking “How does the marketing literature make sense of food ‘localness’?”. The SLR process returned 92 records, which were interpreted by means of QCA. We individuated seven themes representing different research strands on local food consumption, namely (i) consumption drivers; (ii) farmers’ markets; (iii) geographical indication (GI); (iv) global vs. local; (v) locavorism; (vi) organic vs. local; (vii) sustainability. We found that these themes are interconnected, and each contributes to a generally more uniform understanding of the local food concept from a consumer perspective. Our organisation of the findings into themes (Table 1) has provided a viewpoint from which to problematise the way in which food ‘localness’ has so far been conceptualised by the marketing literature, and – at the same time

– allowed us to map the status of the knowledge on the subject. Our findings suggest that food ‘localness’ is more than a geographical indication label or a geographical reference (e.g., a product P travelling X miles from place Y), and that its promotion should rely on the embeddedness of a consumer or product in the landscape and/or culture of a given place/territory, as well as on consumers’ identity construction in the face of globalisation and sustainability issues. Most importantly, sustainability should not be understood only in terms of mindfulness, altruism, or environmental friendliness, but as a concept depending on the problematisation of the global food system structures in a socio-political and/or communitarian vein (Jackson et al., 2021).

Limitations and future research

This study has focused only on consumer-centred scientific articles published in high ranking journals of the marketing research area. Future research should extend findings and consider studies in the areas of retailing, tourism, services marketing and hospitality management. Moreover, future research should consider including relevant articles in other fields of the social sciences, which traditionally inform marketing research, such as sociology, and anthropology.

Managerial implications

From a managerial perspective, this research provides evidence of the need for local food producers (who do not rely on organic food certifications or GI labelling systems protecting typical, regional, and specialty food products) to make sourcing ingredients and production methods explicit to consumers, and to position themselves and their products as an alternative to the global agri-food system. In particular, marketing managers should consider employing demarketing practices and enhance consumers’ local (vs. global) identity through products’ ‘localness’ authenticity.

Main references

Given the nature of this paper, please note that we list here only the references in the Introduction, Method, and Conclusion sections. For a full list of the results of this SLR, please refer to the author.

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