

Local Foodscape Attributes and their Impact on Trust and the Purchase Intention

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This study sought to explore the dimensions of the local foodscape attributes that shape consumer local food purchase intention. Despite the growing consumer interest in purchasing local food, a little research focuses in understanding the relationship of the local foodscape attributes, trust, and purchase intention.

A two-stage qualitative methodology was adopted consisting of five focus group discussions and 25 semi-structured interviews with consumers in Northern Ireland. Focus groups broadly explored consumer understanding of various local foodscape cues. The semi-structured interviews sought to explore more in-depth interrelationships between those identified local foodscape attributes and their influences on the local food purchase intention.

Findings reveal, the setting within which local food is sold, exhibit multi-sensorial cues which diffuses ethical, cognitive, and emotional signals. This study thus contributes and expand the understanding that local foodscape attributes reinforce trust through various socio-material features; subsequently co-create experience and value that guide local food purchase intention.

Keywords – *Local foodscape, trust, ethical perceptions, purchase intention*

Identified Track- *Consumer Behavior*

1.Introduction

The concept of foodscapes was first introduced by Yasmeeen (1995) and later incorporate the notion of food and landscape including ‘food environment’. The term ‘foodscape’ explains how various social practices (shopping, cooking, eating) has shaped, influenced, and transformed food landscapes and thus, it is perceived differently by different individuals. Concept of foodscape is conceptualized through four key approaches: spatial (Clary et al., 2016; Vogel et al., 2017; Wilkins et al., 2019), social and cultural (Johnston and Goodman 2015; Agaronov et al., 2019), behavioral (Mikkelsen 2011; Verbeke et al., 2013; Lindberg et al., 2018; Surman and Hamilton 2019), and systemic (Goodman 2016; Parham 2019). Further multiple perspectives were included to the concept such as, institutional foodscapes, domestic foodscapes and retail foodscapes. The retail perspective defined the term ‘foodscape’ as a store’s physical environmental dimensions such as ambient conditions, space/function, and signs, symbols, and artifacts that influence consumers’ and employees’ responses and behaviors (Bitner 1992; Lindberg et al. 2018).

The retail approach of foodscape (Bitner, 1992; Sherry, 1998) embrace the notion of servicescape and highlight the importance of places and spaces where consumption experiences take place. A plethora of studies have shown that ‘servicescape’, ‘atmospherics and ‘ambience’ concepts affect consumers’ experiences by design, ambient, social, tangible and intangible cues (Kotler, 1974; Bitner, 1992; Sherry, 1998). Alongside this, various local food consumption motives are widely explored within the literature (Megicks et al 2012; Birch et. al., 2018). Within local food context, foodscape concept is applied to examine motives underpinning tourists’ travel (Kim et al., 2019) and explored its vital roles in affective responses, such as emotions (Lee et al., 2008), perceived value (Choe and Kim 2018), trust (Al-Ansi et al., 2019), attachment (Everett and Aitchison 2008; Hsu and Scott 2020), satisfaction (Lee et al., 2008, Al-Ansi et al., 2019) and behavioral responses, such as revisit intention and word-of-mouth (Choe and Kim 2018). The role of physical places in endorsing ethical values has received attention among the academics too (Moraes et al., 2010; Coles & Crang, 2011; Chatzidakis et al., 2012; Papaoikonomou & Alarcón, 2015). However, very little academic attention been made in understanding the inter-play of the local foodscape attributes and its multisensorial-experiential aspects in co-creating value towards purchase intention. In order to address this research gap, the study will examine the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the key attributes of the local foodscape?

RQ2: How do these attributes impact on trust and the local food purchase intention?

2. Literature Review

The concept of environmental psychology outlined the relationship between shoppers and the purchasing environment. Mehrabian and Russell (1974) highlighted that consumers respond to various in-store atmospheric cues via an “approach or avoid” behaviour. Kotler (1973-1974) defined this store atmosphere as “the effort to design buying environments to produce specific emotional effects in the buyer that enhance his purchase probability” (p. 50). Later, Bitner’s (1992) servicescape concept focused on the influence of the in-store “built” environment where consumers and employees interact (p. 58), and where consumer responsiveness depends on in-store factors such as design and crowding (Grossbart et al., 1990); in-store displays and store atmospherics (Campbell 2011; Huddleston et al. 2018). Various studies highlighted the effects of store atmospheric cues in eliciting an emotional state which in turn influence consumers’ behavioral intention (Donovan and Rossiter, 1994; Campbell 2011) and those emotional states work as a key determinant for an individual to spend longer time within the store.

In relation to local food, Stolzenbach et al. (2013) showed that consumers' preference for local food is based on its sensory properties, which consumers derived from product memory based on prior experiences (Mojet and Koster, 2005); and previous experience combined with available product information demonstrates product familiarity (Baloglu 2001). Thus, a memorable local food consumption experience can elicit a positive attitude toward local food (Tsai, 2016; Sthapit, 2017; Soltani et al., 2020). This is because a strong affect or emotion facilitates better memory recall (Bastiaansen et al., 2019), and positive memories create emotional bonds with local food (Sthapit et al., 2017; Richards 2021). Simultaneously, sensory aspects of local food can elicit memorable outcomes (Björk and Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2013; Stone et al., 2018; Williams et al., 2019), emotional pleasurable sensory experiences from the past (Holbrook and Schindler 2003; Stone et al., 2022), and establish satisfaction for consumers (Adongo et al., 2015; Stone et al., 2018).

On the other hand, nostalgia is considered as an influential element of the servicescape, which can be referred to as longing for another place or time or past (Kessous & Roux, 2008).

Consumer nostalgic experiences are mainly either existential and/or aesthetical (Goulding, 2001). Previous research has highlighted atmospheric cues such as scent (Orth & Bourrain, 2008), country-style decor (Kauppinen-Räsänen et al., 2013), historic artifacts (Chen et al., 2014; Hamilton & Wagner, 2014), and the recreation of traditional rituals (Hamilton & Wagner, 2014) creates existential and esthetical nostalgic memories that positively reinforce consumer experiences in a retail environment.

Furthermore, there is a co-relation between positive experiences, trust, reliability and behavioural outcomes such as brand loyalty, willingness to pay a premium price and purchase intention (Castaldo et al., 2009). The concept of trust can be defined as the “expectations held by the consumer that the store, its people, and its products are dependable and can be relied on to deliver on their promises” (Guenzi et al., 2009, p. 292). Within the food context trust is also considered as a risk-reducing element, while increasing consumer loyalty (Rampl et al., 2012) through purchase behavior and word-of-mouth communication (Yang et al., 2022). Within local food literature, trust is highlighted as a key element in establishing connectedness between producers and consumers (Pearson et al., 2011). Therefore, the nature of consumer trust in the local foodscape and its role in stimulating purchase intention is worthy of study.

3. Methodology

A two-stage qualitative methodology was adopted, consisting of focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews with consumers in Northern Ireland. The local and artisan food sector in Northern Ireland has seen a growing consumer demand for specialist, local food products representing authenticity and freshness (Mintel, 2017). Thus, the changing market conditions in Northern Ireland provide an interesting setting within which to explore the co-relation of local foodscape attributes and purchase intention. The nature of the research question required a phenomenological approach as individuals may have varied opinion; and particularly there is call for qualitative study on local foodscapes (Davies and Gutsche, 2016; Vonthron et al., 2020) to explore how consumers view and perceive new concepts such as local foodscapes (Yang et al., 2022). 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) was adopted. Individuals or groups of individuals were selected with

knowledge and experience of the phenomena of interest (Palinkas et al., 2015; Shaheen and Pradhan, 2019) and participants background details, their personal characteristics and demographics, and their food shopping behaviour were captured.

The first stage of data collection consisted of five focus groups (N = 30) 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. Focus groups topics broadly explored consumers' general attitudes towards local food outlets, and the main factors influencing their local food purchase intention from certain local food stores. Local food packaging, local food stores image and in-store signage was used as a projective tool to stimulate responses and reassociate participants with earlier experiences and memories (Mugel et al., 2019). The second stage of data collection involved 25 in-depth semi-structured one-to-one interviews lasted typically 40-60 minutes, were recorded and transcribed. The interviews further explore the themes emerging from the focus groups and sought to delve deeper into the relationships between the local foodscape attributes and consumer purchase intention. Participants were asked to explain how they translate local foodscape attributes into a meaningful experience and how those experiences shaped their opinions about local food and foodscapes. A combination of the qualitative data analysis software package NVivo (10) with traditional coding materials (coloured pens, paper, and display boards) were used to retrieve, organise the large volumes of data in a timely manner (Miles and Huberman, 1994) and it assist in the identification of core themes.

The following sections will present the results from the focus groups and interviews in relation to each of the research questions and reference will be made to core themes and their associated local foodscapes attributes as presented in Figure 1. Focus participants are coded as FP and interview participants as IP.

4. Findings

4.1 Key Attributes of the Local Foodscape

The atmosphere of local foodscapes such as farm shops or greengrocers, butchers or bakers has a multi-dimensional effect on purchase intention. At once, it helps to create attention, convey a message while generating a desire or appetite for purchasing the local food item. During the focus groups and interviews respondents referred to a large number of value-added local foodscape attributes (extrinsic and intrinsic cues) which included: store layout

(natural or earthy ambience); traceable and transparent food information (display of food origin and clear labeling, product information and the story behind it); signage/symbols/pictures and artifacts of the place, farmers and the product; easy access in terms of visible marking of the food aisle and access to the store; connectedness, and interaction with the store keepers; store cleanliness; farm and animal welfare; additional services (online service, home delivery facility). Respondents were exposed to the various multi-sensorial elements of a local foodscape, where a visual depiction of the natural and earthy elements was key sensory cues: *“I think it is pure sensory details that matter. If it looks good, tasty, you buy it. These are the first considerations when you look at the products. If you look at the vegetables, people go into shops, and they shake it, squeeze it, rattle it, and smell it before they buy it. Therefore, the sensory appeal comes first and the most important I believe. There is a certain level of excitement from getting fresh food.”* (IP7, Rural Male)

Visual cues from the various elements of the interior environment of the foodscape not only emit sensory cues but also links to the surrounding place, for instance *“It is very visual how you respond and how you see.”* (IP7). The natural aesthetics of the local foodscape decor provides a sense of localness and embed place value through an emotional-aesthetic experience (Carù & Cova, 2006; Stone et al., 2022): *“In terms of local business or shops, they tend to go with nature very much in their marketing. As an example, food and wine shops in Victoria Square use wood and stuff from nature to attract people. This makes it feel very local and natural.”* (FIP8, Urban Male)

Communication either through packaging or in person and the store signposts about the available food products, producers and process creates an additional advantage that respondent valued. This is the case for a young respondent: *“My butchers use signposts to tell you what is in the meat product and if you ask them, they always tell you how to cook, so it is handier for me... In that way, it is very helpful.”* (IP11, Urban Female). Cumulative effect of these cues co-create experience within the stores and in turn, fosters a memorable experience. Likewise, respondent felt: *“If you find a local jam it gives you a nice feeling, the experience of a feel-good factor, good taste, and authentic smell... makes you feel good.”* (IP20, Rural Male)

Similar to Kneafsey’s (2007) findings, respondents valued the connectedness and the social relationship between producer and consumer in the local foodscape. For instance, a mature

male adult observed that the *“personal touch is very important.” (IP12, Urban Male)*. The value of social interaction with local producers and farmers was also expressed: *“There is a social connection as well. So, it is nice to have that connection rather than going to somebody unknown.” (IP19, Urban Male)*. The scope of socialisation within the local foodscape provides knowledge, trust, and personalisation opportunities. Thus, these findings suggest that the local foodscape facilitates a degree of relationship proximity (Feagan, 2007; Eriksen, 2013): *“The connection with people you make when you go to a local shop is wonderful.... Therefore, you get that connectivity if you go to those little local shops around you. The people in the local shops will know you by what you buy, which I think is a genuinely personal touch and makes you feel acknowledged.” (IP11, Urban Female)*

Thus, in support of Sthapit et al., (2017) and Richards (2021), consumers' experiences and exposure within the local foodscape creates an emotional bond between the consumer and local food products and their producers which increases perceived transparency. Other attributes cited by respondents included store cleanliness and accessibility. Store cleanliness was also highlighted as a vital issue that could impact consumer confidence: *“...storekeeper cleanliness would be a genuine issue of health and hygiene.” (IP17, Female Urban)*. In terms of store accessibility, a respondent noted: *“...finding the place where you can get local produce is the main challenge for me. They are very rural and hard to find, and you drive a long way. You will not get everything in one place, and some local shops or farmer shops do not properly advertise, so it is hard to find them.” (IP5, Rural Female)*.

4.2 Ethical Perceptions, Trust, and Purchase Intention

Respondents interpreted the local foodscape attributes through an ethical credentials' lens, as ethical perceptions are critical to building trust, thus acting as an influential factor in the purchasing decision. Comparisons were made with the traditional, food supermarket context, where there was a degree of skepticism regarding the strength of local food credentials: *“It does make a difference to me when I am going to a farmer's shop and meeting people face to face. I could see somebody who has dug up the vegetables and same with the fish when I meet a fisherman, I could see the who knows where the fish is coming from where in the Tesco's you do not know at all, and that is the difference to me.” (FIP6, Rural Female)*.

Ethical and quality perceptions associated with the local foodscape attributes facilitate familiarity, reliability and trust towards the food product and the wider foodscape: *“The quality aspect of knowing where your food is coming from makes me feel less insecure.” (F1P8, Urban Male); “To me, local food is a reliable indicator of freshness and quality.” (F2P1, Urban Female).* Therefore, respondents felt valued by: *“buying better quality and trustworthy products from the butcher’s shop rather than buying it from the supermarkets.” (IP18, Urban Male).* The credibility of the foodscape context also reinforced trust through traceable: *“I would usually go for it instead of something that has been flown for miles...” (IP9 Urban Male).* and ethical credential *“Also, when I buy local produce fruits, vegetables or meat it comes to my mind that it has been looked after properly, and animals are fed well before slaughter. In turn, I mainly gain a big relief inside. You might say a great assurance that what you are buying is good. That is what local meant to be as well.” (IP9)*

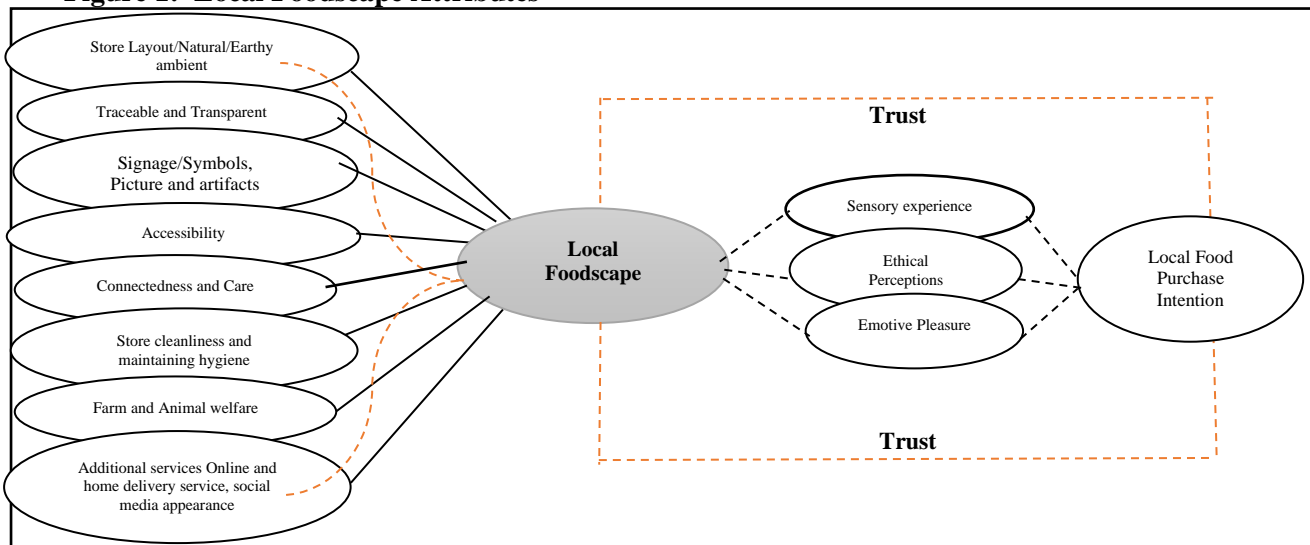
The findings revealed the multilayered concept of trust in relation to the local foodscape. Respondents’ testimonies signaled an emotional attachment that had been formed through engagement with the local foodscape attributes, reducing uncertainty and instilling trust: *“... a person would walk with you and tell you that this is new, and you know they are more knowledgeable, so it makes it easier for you to shop whereas you will not get that recommendation in the big shop...and you gain trust in them and in their products.” (IP18, Male Urban).* Trust is therefore built through direct interaction between consumer and producer, the consumer exposure to the various elements of the local foodscape, which acts to stimulate purchase intention.

5. Discussion and Implications

The findings revealed the importance of local foodscape attributes in shaping consumer trust and purchase intention. Figure 1 illustrates these elements of the local foodscape and their mediating role in developing trust and the purchase intention. Identified key characteristics of the local foodscape contain a complex mix of environmental and psychological factors that influence the innate responses and purchasing intentions of consumers. Therefore, in the case of local food, the foodscape represents a context where consumers encounter various stimuli that influence their sense of being social, sensorial, and ethical. The findings

emphasize the value of connectedness through place, product, and people to specific purchase situations.

Figure 1: Local Foodscape Attributes



Thus, consumers seek social and personal comfort from the local foodscape and the local foodscape has the potential for value co-creation. The findings extend knowledge by identifying the importance of various socio-material dimensions of the local foodscape (Badu-Baiden et al., 2021) and by arguing that local food consumption is not only guided by culture, social systems, and processes (Chatzidakis et al., 2012; Fuentes & Sörum, 2019) but also by food consumption values such as ethical, cognitive, emotional and multisensorial values. The findings indicate that trust is a driver of purchase intention, and the nature of trust is related to the specific features of the product, people and the place context.

There are a number of practical implications. Local food operators should adopt marketing agendas that incorporate various aesthetic cues to increase sensory experience, ethical perception, and emotive pleasure which in turn builds consumer trust and potentially stimulates purchase intention. The use of symbols, pictures, artifacts, stories and sensory cues could ease food sustainability and ethical concerns and would further evidence how local food actors may co-create value. Therefore, reflecting local settings would benefit marketers in their efforts to increase the brand value of local foodscapes and foster local or regional growth.

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