Amplifying local food consumption and increasing basket value through shopping basket attributes saliency

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Amplifying local food consumption and increasing basket value through shopping basket attributes saliency

Despite positive attitudes reported toward local food products consumption, a gap yet remains between such attitudes and actual purchasing behavior. This study investigates whether disclosing the localness score of grocery baskets influences consumer identity congruence and future purchase intentions. Through a pre-registered online experiment with 448 UK-based participants, we assigned subjects to one of three conditions (control, low, or high basket localness scores). Results show disclosing low localness scores reduces identity congruence and significantly increases planned local food purchases, while disclosed high scores enhance identity congruence without altering purchase intentions. These findings underscore the potential of basket-level localness cues in addressing the attitude-behavior gap, supporting interventions aimed at promoting sustainable food consumption.

Keywords: basket attribute, local food preference, identity consumption

Track: Consumer Behavior

1. Introduction

Food consumption plays a significant role in environmental negative externalities (Poore & Nemecek, 2018) and thus offers opportunities for improvement. For illustration, approximately one-third of human-generated emissions are related to food consumption and its related systems. These food-related externalities manifest in different forms and stem from several processes. Namely, through production, processing, transportation and distribution (Poore & Nemecek, 2018).

Considering its positive effect on climate change, there has been long-standing public interest in sustainable food consumption (Vermeir & Verbeke, 2006). Reisch et al. (2013) define sustainable consumption as a composite concept involving environmental, social and economic aspects. It encompasses the consumption of products which minimize their impact on the environment and local communities throughout their lifecycle (from production to disposal). One category therein consists in local consumption which impacts all stages of the food production process, leading to a reduction in environmental externalities. At the agricultural production stage, locally sourced food travels shorter distances throughout its lifecycle (Martinez et al., 2010). Shorter supply chains also require lower energy use for transportation and refrigeration, leading to lower overall greenhouse gas emissions (Weber & Matthews, 2008). Through shorter supply chains and thus longer shelf lives, locally sourced food could decrease food waste. In their study, Scholz et al., (2015) show that 85% of the total wasted mass comes from fruits and vegetables which are less shelf-stable by nature. Also, local food systems often involve fewer intermediaries. Local markets and direct sales from farmers to consumers usually require less or no packaging, thus reducing plastic pollution (Jambeck et al., 2015). Moreover, local food consumption affects other areas of sustainable food consumption through its social and economic dimensions. When consumers purchase locally, they help sustain local farms and businesses. In turn this strengthens economic stability and encourages the adoption of environmentally friendly practices within the community (Martinez et al., 2010).

Despite such positive externalities and positive attitudes reported toward local food products consumption Aprile et al. (2016), a gap yet remains between these positive consumer attitudes and their actual purchasing behavior. Previous research has extensively studied the behavioral effects of localness attributes cues and displays on sustainable product purchases (Vlaeminck et al., 2014). However, most studies on localness have focused on the product or brand level, leaving a gap: What are the effects of basket-level localness attribute on local food consumption? While existing research acknowledges the attitude-behavior gap in local food

consumption, there remains a notable gap in the literature regarding how consumer perceptions contribute to this discrepancy. This paper seeks to address this gap by focusing on measurement issues, particularly the role of consumer perceptions in shaping the disconnection between expressed attitudes and actual behavioral outcomes.

2. Theoretical developments

There is no universally accepted definition of local food. Instead, multiple definitions coexist based on various criteria (Martinez, 2010): (a) Distribution Set-up: products purchased directly from the producer, such as farm-to-market schemes. These setups usually emphasize freshness and direct support for local farmers. (b) Geography: defined by distance from the production to the customer or predefined areas such as local, regional, or national levels. These emphasize environmental benefits and the concept of terroir, which highlights the unique features of the local environment. (c) Law, Politics, and Labels: "Made in" labels, which can be protected by law. These labels often focus on national identity and supporting the domestic economy (Martinez, 2010).

Research shows a generally positive consumer attitude regarding local food consumption. For example, Aprile et al. (2016) showed that 95% of the respondents reported making efforts to buy local products, most of whom do so sometimes or often. Local products are often perceived as more expensive (Ajzen, 2018; Argyriou, E., & Melewar, 2011; Morris et al. 2002; Mothersbaugh & Hawkins 2016). Past research of store assortments confirms that on average, the price per kilogram or liter of local products is higher. This price premium reflects higher production costs due to smaller scale operations, as well as customers' willingness to pay more for perceived benefits such as freshness, quality, and support for local farmers (Ajzen, 2018; Argyriou & Melewar, 2011). Consumer emotions towards local products can be influenced by nationalism, environmental concerns, and a sense of community. Studies show that consumers feel they are contributing to national prosperity and environmental sustainability by purchasing local products (Aprile et al., 2016). Positive attitudes towards local food translate into strong behavioral intentions to purchase such products. For instance, Jekanowski et al. (2000) showed that customers' beliefs about the quality and freshness of local products positively influence their purchase intentions.

As consumer attitude towards local food consumption stems from different motivations and given that consumers make different inferences about local products, Aprile et al. (2016) define four categories of local food products consumers: ethnocentric consumers, environmentalists, strict localists and quality-label oriented customers.

Despite positive attitudes toward local food, a gap often exists between these attitudes and actual purchasing behavior, attributed to several factors (Schäufele & Janssen, 2021; Vermeir & Verbeke, 2006). Limited availability of local products in stores can moderate the consumers' ability to implement their behavioral intentions. Resources constraints such as financial limitations or local products price premiums can have a negative effect on local products purchases. Social pressure can also influence behavior. Friends, family and other peers' habits or preferences can affect one's preference for local food consumption. Additionally, measurement issues can generate a gap between reported attitudes and actual purchase behavior. Part of all of these factors contribute to the attitude-behavior gap in local food consumption (Schäufele & Janssen, 2021; Vermeir & Verbeke, 2006). This paper focuses specifically on measurement issues related to consumer perceptions of local food and how these perceptions can create gap between attitudes and purchasing behavior.

We posit that the behavioral-gap stems from a misperception of the basket composition. When shopping, consumers make quick sequential item selections based on these items' attributes both online and in physical stores (Anesbury et al., 2016). At basket level, the main salient attribute consists of the total price paid. This misperception could be corrected through disclosing the actual level of localness at the basket level post-purchase. Drawing on Sirgy's (1985) self-congruity concept we define it as the alignment between a subject's self-concept (their own perception of themselves) and the characteristics of the grocery basket they purchase. We predict that such disclosure would affect the consumer's identity congruence. Consumers who are shown that their basket contains a low level of local products would be likely to have a decrease in their identity congruence, as it creates a misalignment between their self-concept and the reality of their actual behavior. However, consumers who are shown that their basket includes a high level of local products would see a reinforcement of their identity congruence. Thus:

H1.a: Disclosure of a low localness score decreases identity congruence.

H1.b: Disclosure of a high localness score increases identity congruence.

General local products consumption preference levels vary between individuals and are led or influenced by different motivations (Aprile, 2016). By further application to local food consumption, we expect that people with higher local products preference exhibit a higher effect after the disclosure of the true basket localness score. Thus:

H2: Consumer preference toward local products positively moderates the effect of true locavore score on implementation intention toward local food consumption.

Drawing on cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957; Harmon-Jones & Mills, 2019), we posit that people who exhibit a negative perception gap between their estimated basket localness score and their true basket localness score would seek to correct the discrepancy between their perceived identity and their actual behavior. Therefrom resulting in an increased level of local food products in their future food grocery baskets. Moreover, we predict that individuals with a positive gap would only marginally decrease the proportion of local food products in their future grocery baskets. This asymmetry in behavioral adjustment stems from the stronger motivational drive to resolve dissonance caused by a negative gap, where one's perceived identity as a supporter of local products is contradicted. Conversely, a positive gap reinforces the consumer's identity, affirming their alignment with their values and eliminating any psychological pressure to make further changes. A reinforced identity, rather than leading to a desire to reduce identity congruence, serves to stabilize behavior, as consumers feel validated in their purchasing choices and see no need to adjust downward. Thus:

H3.a: A decrease in identity congruence from a negative gap increases future local food purchases.

H3.b: A decrease in identity congruence from a positive does not affect future local food purchases.

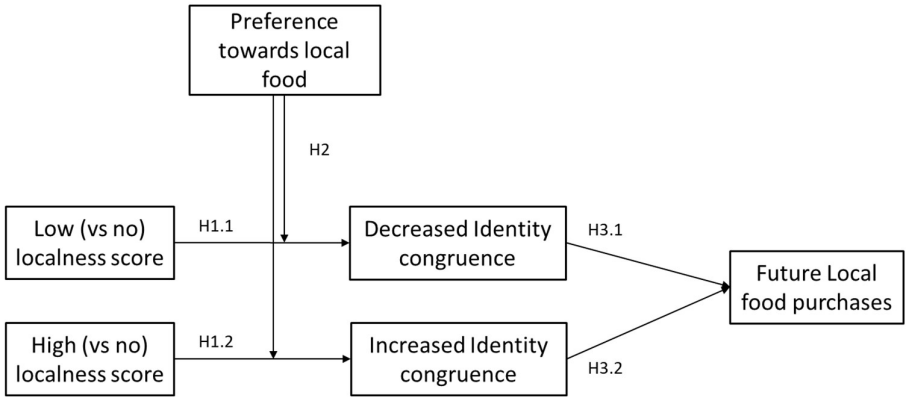


Figure 1 - Conceptual model

3. Study

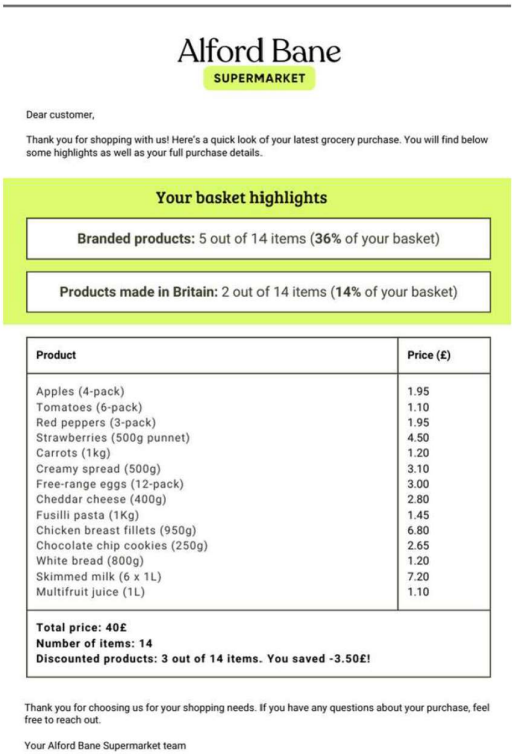
3.1. Design

We tested our prediction through a between-subjects pre-registered online experiment. We randomly assigned participants to a control condition or to one of two experimental conditions (low basket localness score or high basket localness score).

450 UK-based participants were recruited via Prolific and compensated as per the applicable standards. As per our pre-registration form, participants who failed the pre-requisite attention check were not allowed to take part in the study and are thus included. 2 participants were rejected as they failed to properly fill in their demographics data resulting in a final sample of 448 participants. The average age of the participants was 41.31 years old (SD = 13.60). Amongst the 448 subjects, 63.61% identified as female, 35.71% as male and less than 1% as other or prefer not to say.

Each condition consisted of a hypothetical shopping scenario where participants were presented with a grocery basket summary sent by e-mail following a food grocery basket purchase at supermarket. The summary included the list of products purchased, the total price paid and other common information as well as a "basket highlight" section which included the percentage of branded products which served as dummy information for comparability.

In the control condition, no information about the level of localness of the basket was provided. As part of our intervention, participants in the experimental conditions were shown the same summary report which in addition also disclosed the level of localness of the purchased basket. Participants in the low basket localness score condition read that their basket contained 14% of local products (see Fig. 2 for illustration) while those in the high basket localness score condition were shown a level of 86% of local products.



Alford Bane
SUPERMARKET

Dear customer,

Thank you for shopping with us! Here's a quick look of your latest grocery purchase. You will find below some highlights as well as your full purchase details.

Your basket highlights

Branded products: 5 out of 14 items (**36%** of your basket)

Products made in Britain: 2 out of 14 items (**14%** of your basket)

Product	Price (£)
Apples (4-pack)	1.95
Tomatoes (6-pack)	1.10
Red peppers (3-pack)	1.95
Strawberries (500g punnet)	4.50
Carrots (1kg)	1.20
Creamy spread (500g)	3.10
Free-range eggs (12-pack)	3.00
Cheddar cheese (400g)	2.80
Fusilli pasta (1Kg)	1.45
Chicken breast fillets (950g)	6.80
Chocolate chip cookies (250g)	2.65
White bread (800g)	1.20
Skimmed milk (6 x 1L)	7.20
Multifruit juice (1L)	1.10

Total price: 40£
Number of items: 14
Discounted products: 3 out of 14 items. You saved -3.50£!

Thank you for choosing us for your shopping needs. If you have any questions about your purchase, feel free to reach out.

Your Alford Bane Supermarket team

Figure 2 - Summary grocery basket report shown to participants in the low basket localness score condition

This was followed by a survey evaluating their perception of the basket as well as their identity congruence, behavioral intentions, and preferences for future local food consumption. We performed a direct measure of identity congruence through a likert scale by asking participants to rate how well their grocery basket aligned with their personal values. To evaluate preference towards local food products, we employed the validated locavorism scale developed by Reich, Beck, and Price (2018). For future local food product purchases, participants were asked to indicate the level of local food products they plan to include in their food grocery baskets during their next food shopping trip with a percentage between 0% and 100%.

3.2. Results

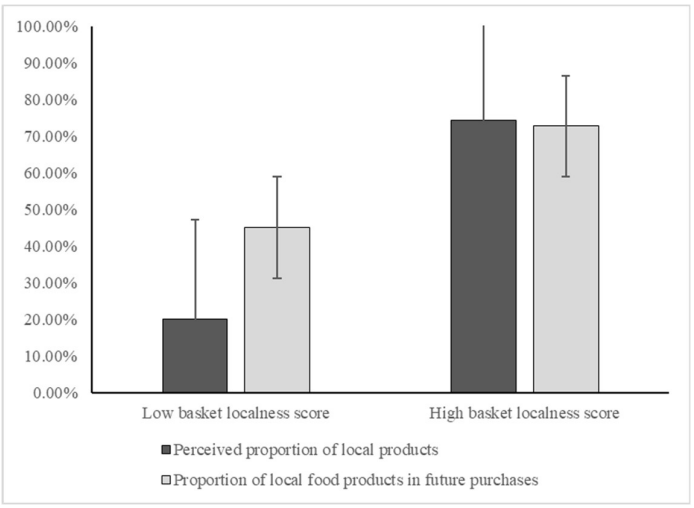


Figure 2 – Proportion of localness perceived in study 1 and proportion of planned local food products in future purchases

Figure 3 shows the perceived proportion of local products and the proportion of local food products planned for future purchases across the two treatment conditions. In the low basket localness score group, participants perceived only 20.12% of their basket as local. As predicted, their planned future local food products purchases were substantially higher at 45.07%. We used paired t-tests to assess the differences. We confirmed a significant difference between perceived and planned proportions ($M = 24.95$, $p < .001$). This shows that participants in the low basket localness score condition significantly plan on increasing the proportion of local food products in their future purchases. In the high basket localness score condition, participants perceived a high 74.41% of their basket as local. Their future purchase intentions were at a similar level (72.72%). A paired t-test confirmed that there was no significant difference between the perceived and planned proportions ($M = -1.68$, $p = .365$). This suggests that the participants were satisfied with the localness of their basket and did not plan to adjust

their purchasing behavior to decrease the level of local food products they plan to purchase in the future.

These findings highlight a clear relationship between perceived localness and future purchase intentions, with lower perceived localness driving higher adjustments in future consumption plans, while higher perceived localness results in no significant change.

Next, we used a generalized structural equation model (GSEM) to estimate the mediated model. Participants in the low basket localness score condition showed a significant decrease in identity congruence compared to the control group ($\beta = -0.448$, $p = 0.001$). Conversely, participants in the high basket localness score condition exhibited a significant increase in identity congruence ($\beta = 0.506$, $p < 0.001$). We controlled for gender, being a male had a significant positive effect on identity congruence ($\beta = 0.232$, $p = 0.043$) while the other gender or prefer not to say category had no effect ($\beta = -0.449$, $p = 0.504$). Age did not have an effect either ($\beta = -0.005$, $p = 0.229$).

The interaction between the preference local food products and identity congruence had a significant negative effect on identity congruence in the low basket localness score condition ($\beta = -0.112$, $p = 0.010$) showing that a people with a higher level of preference toward local products are more affected by the disclosure of the basket localness score. This moderator did not have a significant for the subjects in the high basket localness score condition ($\beta = -0.020$, $p = 0.549$).

For participants in the low basket localness score condition, identity congruence had a significant negative effect on the difference between current behavior and future planned local food purchases as predicted ($\beta = -4.994$, $p = 0.027$). As predicted for participants in the high basket localness score condition, the increase of identity congruence had no effect on the future planned behavior ($\beta = -1.015$, $p = 0.680$). Gender (male) had a significant negative effect on the difference variable ($\beta = -4.982$, $p = 0.041$), while age ($\beta = 0.134$, $p = 0.121$) and the other gender or prefer not to say category ($\beta = 4.358$, $p = 0.761$) had no effect.

4. Discussion

This study shows the impact of basket-level localness disclosure on future local food purchases. Participants shown a low basket localness score saw a reduction in their identity congruence, leading to significant increases in planned local food purchases. However, those with a high localness score exhibited a higher identity congruence which did not lead to any significant change in their planned behavior. This suggests that the effect of a change in identity congruence is asymmetrical and only affects people who show a misalignment. Overall, these findings suggest that identity attributes saliency at basket level allow to increase the overall

purchases of local food products without negatively affecting consumers already displaying a high level of local food purchases.

By focusing on basket-level perceptions, this research extends the literature on sustainable consumption, demonstrating the potential of holistic feedback in addressing the attitude-behavior gap. Interventions targeting identity congruence can effectively promote sustainable purchasing by correcting misperceived behaviors. Price premiums related to local products also offer opportunities to retailers by nudging consumers toward higher-price and higher-margin products thus potentially increasing the average consumer spendings and profitability. This research also highlights a new path of opportunities for further research on identity consumption at basket level.

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