

The Consumer Costs and Rewards of Direct Social Interaction with Vendors at Farmers' Markets

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This study examines the consumer rewards and costs of having direct communication with a farmer at a farmers' market. This analysis deepens an understanding of interpersonal benefits, as well as the potential negative aspects of this direct exchange. This study uses qualitative interviewing methods, emphasizes thematic coding, and uses principles from grounded theory. Several themes encapsulate the customer experience regarding direct communication with the farmer. These included the rewards of face-to-face communication, friendship, trust, customized service, and regularity. The costs of a direct consumer-farmer interaction included obligation and having to endure rude farmer behaviors. The qualitative study responses reflect the perceptions of the participants. Future studies could use the categories discovered to survey a larger sample and sample across markets in different locations. This study, unlike many farmers' market surveys, goes into much greater depth by cataloging the consumer rewards and costs that result from purchasing directly from a farmer.

Keywords: Consumer behavior, Farmers' Markets, Buyer-Seller Relationship, Interpersonal Communication, Social Exchange Theory, Costs, Rewards

Introduction

Farmers' markets have been growing dramatically in recent decades, and in this paper, qualitative interview data concerning the rewards and costs customers experience by communicating directly with farmers at farmers' markets is analyzed. An overview of farmers' market growth and customers' enjoyment of the social aspect of markets is provided first. Then the methods are explained. Interview data is interpreted through the theoretical lens of the costs and rewards from social exchange theory (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; Emerson, 1976; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). This paper is an exploratory project that aims to catalog and deepen our understanding of the effects of the increased social interaction between buyer and seller.

A Brief History of Farmers' Markets

Farmers' markets in the United States (U.S.) have grown from around 1,000 to over 8,000 in roughly the past 25 years (Gowin, 2009; USDA, 2014). Farmers' markets have also become popular in many other countries in the West, including the United Kingdom and Canada (Feagan & Morris, 2009; Smithers, Lamarche, & Joseph, 2008; Trobe, 2001). Some estimate farmers' markets generate around \$1 billion annually in the U.S. (C. Brown & Miller, 2008).

Farmers' markets are growing in popularity for a variety of reasons. One reason is that customers view food from the farmers' market as better than industrially produced food, and farmers' markets are an outlet for customers to support local growers (A. Brown, 2002; Feagan & Morris, 2009; McNeill & Hale, 2016; Smithers et al., 2008). Industrially produced food has been critiqued a variety of reasons, with critics citing health, environmental, and labor problems with this production model (Kenner, 2008; Pollan, 2007, 2008). Others have exposed the way industrial food systems mistreat employees, often immigrant laborers, in the meatpacking (Stull & Broadway, 2004) and fruit industries (Stephen, 2007). The result is that some consumers fear their food and feel they are not able to trust industrially produced food (Pollan, 2007, 2008;

Winne, 2008; Winter, 2003). Some consumers support local producers at farmers' markets as an effort to encourage sustainable agricultural methods (Alkon, 2008a, 2008b; Forssell & Lankoski, 2015; Garner, 2014). Thus these consumers use their buying power to cast their vote for what they perceive as a better system, even though in reality there is no guarantee that local farmers at these markets are growing sustainably (Born & Purcell, 2006; Forssell & Lankoski, 2015). They then turn to farmers' markets as a potential source of high quality, healthy, fresh, sustainably produced food (Alonso & O'Neill, 2011; A. Brown, 2002; Wolf, Spittler, & Ahern, 2005). Obtaining high quality products (often fresh produce) that are nutritious is the dominant reason people report attending markets (Alonso & O'Neill, 2011; Andreatta & Wickliffe, 2002; A. Brown, 2002; Wolf et al., 2005).

However, there are a variety of social benefits that customers enjoy by being embedded in local farmers' market community, as well as simply enjoying the market as fun entertainment (Andreatta & Wickliffe, 2002; Feagan & Morris, 2009; Lyson, Gillespie Jr, & Hilchey, 1995; Robinson & Hartenfeld, 2007; Trobe, 2001). One study found that approximately 50% of customers came to socialize (Wolf et al., 2005). However, across two different studies, only about 14% of customers surveyed reported that socializing was their *primary* reason for attending markets (Gumirakiza, Curtis, & Bosworth, 2014; Wolf et al., 2005). So it seems that the high quality food products lure the consumers to the farmers' market, but customers also enjoy a swath of other benefits while they shop. The literature about the varying benefits customers receive as a result of increased social interaction with farmers is explored next.

Farmers' Markets Provide Social Benefits

Consumers like farmers' markets in part because this venue is a more social shopping experience compared to grocery stores. Farmers' markets are often reported as personal and pleasant places to shop (Andreatta & Wickliffe, 2002; Robinson & Hartenfeld, 2007; Wolf et al., 2005). Farmers' markets encourage direct communication between buyer and seller, which offers the customer a social exchange in addition to the economic exchange. With the sale, customers get the opportunity to receive customized service, the ability to form trust in their food supply, the chance to provide feedback to farmers, and the venue for supporting local farmers (Lyson et al., 1995; McGrath, Sherry, & Heisley, 1993; Robinson & Hartenfeld, 2007). These benefits are described in greater detail next.

Social Space. The farmers' market has been shown to be a social and community space for some customers. In one study, customer-vendor interaction was four times more likely to occur at a farmers' market than at a supermarket (Sommer et al., 1981). However, as previous studies have noted, there are different types of customers with different social goals (McGrath et al., 1993; Wolf et al., 2005). Because vendors tend to retain the same stall location, this encourages a "relational stability" whereby consumers know where to find a particular vendor (McGrath et al., 1993, p. 304). Some people even attend markets for entertainment (Wolf et al., 2005) or to participate in local community even if they don't purchase anything (Robinson & Hartenfeld, 2007). Many farmers at the market analyzed in this study preferred to sell to die hard shoppers (McGrath et al., 1993; McNeill & Hale, 2016) because they tend to spend more money.

Customized Service. Other benefits that arise from increased contact with the seller include customized service. This may include accepting checks, loaning or borrowing items, deferring payment, sharing knowledge, and more (Feagan & Morris, 2009; Hunt, 2007; Robinson & Hartenfeld, 2007). It is not uncommon for other interpersonally rich exchanges to occur between farmers and customers such as gift-giving, the exchange of personal information, and the use of first names (Robinson & Hartenfeld, 2007).

Trust. Trust also appears to play an important role in the customer-farmer relationship at markets. A study of a Canadian farmers' market revealed a prioritization of trust and responsibility (Feagan & Morris, 2009), and another study showed that some consumers tend to trust farmers' markets more than supermarkets (Garner, 2014; McGrath et al., 1993). The farmers' market provides a chance to learn about a farmer's life and develop a shared history many people prefer to buy food from people they know and trust (Robinson & Hartenfeld, 2007). Because not all food products are grown sustainably or organically at farmers' markets, customers learn production methods through conversation (Robinson & Hartenfeld, 2007) or by visiting the farm. Other research indicates that customers place trust in farmers to produce food in

environmentally responsible ways (Garner, 2014). Trust underpins consumer confidence on a number of levels at local farmers' markets.

Feedback. Another dimension of the interpersonally rich dynamic at farmers' markets relates to feedback. Face-to-face feedback means farmers can change practices quickly to meet consumer demand (Hunt, 2007). Unlike large industrial food supply chains, the distance between farmer and customer at farmers' markets is so short that it allows instant feedback that the farmer can use to change practices rather than waiting a whole season or set of seasons to adjust practices. Additionally, because farmers tend to be in the same stall every week at the market, customers can be confident they can have regular contact with and provide that feedback to the farmer who grew their food (Lyson et al., 1995; McGrath et al., 1993).

Supporting Farmers. Another factor that distinguishes farmers' markets from typical grocery stores is that consumers want to support local farmers financially. For example, many studies indicate that supporting local farms is a high priority for consumers (Andreatta & Wickliffe, 2002; A. Brown, 2002; C. Brown & Miller, 2008; Feagan & Morris, 2009). Customers often purchase products from farmers they know in their community in order to support them socially and economically.

Costs and Rewards

Social exchange theory is a perspective that examines the intertwining of social and economic exchange between social actors (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; Emerson, 1976; Foa & Foa, 1980; Roloff, 1981). One of the basic premises is that social actors analyze the costs and rewards of social and economic exchanges and remain in relationships in which the rewards outweigh the costs (Levine, Kim, Ferrara, & Levine, 2010; Roloff, 1981; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). People evaluate the costs and rewards and compare those to alternative options they perceive they could gain if they switched allegiances (Adams, 1963; Dwyer, Schurr, & Oh, 1987; Rusbult, Drigotas, & Verette, 1994; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). This theoretical lens provides a useful vocabulary for analyzing the social benefits customers receive at farmers' markets as well as the potential costs they incur as a result of increased interpersonal communication with farmers.

Currently, we understand farmer-customer relationships primarily based on survey research, and we need more in-depth, richer descriptions of the interpersonal costs and rewards customers receive from farmers. Consumers are increasingly saying that direct communication with farmers is important (Feagan & Morris, 2009; Hunt, 2007), but we need to understand the nuances of this interpersonal connection and what rewards consumers report getting from these relationships. While the literature is full of data charting consumer buying habits and motivations, most analyses of the customer-farmer relationship lack depth or theorization. Many studies identify the farmers' market as a *social* or *community* space (Hunt, 2007; McGrath et al., 1993; Trobe, 2001), but these studies do little to theorize the rich interpersonal dynamic that exists between buyer and seller. Unfortunately questionnaire data often results in percentages of customer preferences for *social interaction* (Andreatta & Wickliffe, 2002; Hunt, 2007; Trobe, 2001), which is an oversimplified term for such a complex set of interactions. The most thorough treatment of the interpersonal relationship between farmers and customers (Robinson & Hartenfeld, 2007) demonstrates how community and relationships can form in these spaces, but this analysis offers a romanticized view of the customer-farmer relationship. We also need to be open to the potential negative aspects (costs) of the customer-farmer relationship to provide an accurate picture. This study, therefore, aims to map the consumer rewards and costs in an exploratory way that will extend our understanding of the customer-farmer relationship. Based on these concerns, the following research questions are addressed:

RQ1: What rewards do consumers perceive they gain as a result of direct interpersonal interaction with vendors at the farmers' markets?

RQ2: What costs do consumers experience as a result of increased interpersonal interaction between vendors and customers?

Methods

Participants. Data was gathered from 19 participants (10 female, 9 male; average age = 46.2 years), representing 16 customers and 3 farmers from the Downtown Lawrence Farmers' Market (DLFM) in Lawrence, Kansas. All participants were over the age of 18, and all participant names used in this paper are pseudonyms. Interviews were conducted in places like coffee shops, on a university campus, in individuals' homes, or at local farms. Semi-structured interviews lasted from 40 minutes to 75 minutes, and one participant preferred to answer questions via email. Interview data produced 324 pages of double-spaced text. Participant observation spanning 10 market days from September 2011-September 2012 was also conducted as well as three farm visits generating 37 pages of field notes.

Procedure. This analysis focuses on interview data. Because the focus is on how people make sense of vendor-customer relationships at the farmers' markets in everyday life, qualitative methods were used (Warren & Karner, 2010) that procured this type of interpretive data. Rooted in symbolic interactionism, this research privileges perceptions and lived experience with the understanding that qualitative work "rests on the importance of interpretation and understanding as key features of social life" (Denzin, 2001, p. 2).

The majority of participants were recruited at the farmers' market. Willing participants signed up, and were contacted via email or telephone to set up interviews. A research protocol was formulated as a framework, but emergent data could certainly change or add it (Charmaz, 2006). Several times spontaneous discussion suggested that a new question should be added to the protocol. Before interviews, participants filled out a short, one-page demographic survey. Then they answered interview questions. The goal of the interview was to have a semi-structured conversation that covered the research questions.

Analysis. The analysis for this project primarily focused on generating a thematic analysis of interview data. Thematic analysis is a qualitative data analysis technique that involves mining participant interview data for repeated ideas, common threads among participants, connections between themes, ideas that stand out, and other data that speaks to the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Ryan & Bernard, 2003). One of the most common uses of thematic analysis involves a researcher trying to see if participant voices are saying the same thing. This constitutes a triangulation approach (Tracy, 2010; Warren & Karner, 2010) to generating themes. Researchers may also identify themes by topics that go unspoken or are avoided and are considered missing data (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). After gathering and transcribing interview data, broad concepts were extracted from the data concerning the interpersonal relationship between farmers and customers and then broke that down into further analytic categories. For example, quotations, field notes, and concepts relating to the customer-farmer relationship were copied and pasted into a single word document. Digital pile sorting was then used to generate more specific categories that teased out nuances among comments. The customer-farmer relationship proved to be multi-faceted. This forced a differentiation between these facets through more specific categories.

Results

Several themes characterized the relationship between farmers and customers. The rewards of an increased farmer-customer relationship included: face-to-face communication, sociality, customized service, trust, accountability, and regularity. The costs of an increased farmer-customer relationship included the emergence of obligation and rude farmer behaviors. These concepts will be explored in detail in the following paragraphs. Some of the results corroborate and deepen our understanding of the social benefits mentioned above in the literature, and some themes reflect new findings.

Rewards of Direct Interpersonal Communication with Farmers

RQ1 asked what rewards customers received as a result of a more direct contact with sellers at farmers' markets. The themes below reflect what customers reported during interviews.

Face-to-face communication. One of the most basic rewards many consumers report is increased face-to-face (FTF) communication with sellers. For instance, Angela said: "Face-to-face, they know our

names for the most part, we know their names. We chit-chat.” Carol said: “When I know the farmer’s name and I can think about the farmer’s face, that means I am more involved, and I think being involved closer to what you are consuming is better.” The customer Matt described the difference between the farmers’ market and the grocery store saying:

It’s nice to be able to have actual information about someone. “Why are these tomatoes more expensive?... ‘Oh, we’ve had a really bad year’ or ‘Oh, we lost a lot or the deer got them.’ The person in the store will just be “That’s what it costs.”

Farmers also promote this benefit. For instance, a farmer named Jean said: “The best thing about farmers’ market face-to-face, there is that open window. That communication is really key because people can learn about what they’re buying.” Direct, FTF communication provides the opportunity for transparency of growing practices, and it also encourages interpersonal connections. Direct, FTF communication is reflected in other studies on farmers’ markets (Feagan & Morris, 2009; Hunt, 2007; Wolf et al., 2005). While not all customers value this increased social contact, many do. The rewards include that customers feel known, they have the chance to talk with farmers, and they are able to be closer to the production source and know more about the product. Some consumers have turned to local food sources to avoid food scares (Feagan & Morris, 2009; Winter, 2003), so having FTF communication helps customers gain confidence.

Sociality. Another social benefit that customers receive is the opportunity to gain or maintain friendships with farmers. Three main sub-themes emerged around friendship: forming new friendships, maintaining preexisting ties, and exchanging social support.

Forming new friendships. Some customers expressed interest in making friendships with vendors made. For instance, a customer named Lisa said: “I’ve met several growers there” and “If you actually shop there regularly, you get to know the growers.” Lisa characterizes farmers’ market relationships as “social” and “a side benefit.” Likewise, Brady and Jaclyn have befriended an artisan chocolate maker. Brady commented: “There’s somebody behind it. You know who made it.” Angela talked about a vendor, saying: “If we don’t have anything to buy from him, we’ll still walk over there and chat with him for five to ten minutes.” Angela likened the farmers’ market to the TV show “Cheers” about bar that turns into a community space hangout. These customers reported knowing the vendors’ children as well. The farmer Reggie stated, “It’s a social occasion for me too. Very social.” Reggie leaves off prices for his products so customers are forced to inquire and interact with him. This strategy contrasts with supermarket products that feature clear pricing and an absentee farmer.

Maintaining Preexisting Friendships. Other customers attended the market to maintain preexisting relationships with farmers. For example, Chris said:

One of the vendors is an old acquaintance. And then his wife worked with my wife, so it’s just one of those community things where they’re just in part of the web of the community. And it turns out that they’re raising these chickens, and they’re really good...We have a personal relationship with him.

Chris later contradicted himself by saying that he was “on the fence with the taste” about this vendor’s chicken, but patronizing his friend’s enterprise was the most important thing. Similarly, Likewise, Peter talked about reconnecting with old friends, and Sheryl has seen her clients vending at the market. Other examples reiterated the fact that some customers use the market to bolster preexisting friendships.

Social Support. Some customers seem to develop a deeper relationship with farmers and exchange mutual social support. Social support (Goldsmith, 2004) at the market can take many forms, including providing someone advice, information, or empathizing about the bad weather. For instance, Angela said,

We would go to Kristen and Dave [farmers]...and say ‘My God, the potato beetles are killing us. What do you do for them?...And that was really helpful...or commiserate... to be reassured that it’s not just our plants that are dying, it’s everybody’s plants that are dying.

Some farmers inquire about customers’ life concerns. Irene said:

Thomas [Grandson] had some health issues that were pretty serious, and Kathy [farmer] stopped me one day when I was at the market and asked specifically how Thomas was.

In this way, farmers offer various types of support to customers, which include advice, emotional support, informational support, and similar resources. This theme of social support will be explored in greater depth in another manuscript (Garner, unpublished).

Customized Service. Another potential reward of a more direct communication between customer and farmer is the possibility for customized service. For instance, the customer Brady said: “You can actually ask them questions. You can actually make requests of them. You can’t go up to most grocery stores.” He used the phrase “more customizable service.” Similarly, Jaclyn reported: “There’s one guy that...he has granola.... I mentioned that I was allergic to walnuts and he said, ‘Well, I’ll bring some next week that doesn’t have walnuts.’” The personal interaction and listening that farmers do allows for these kinds of services. Relatedly, Irene has a grandson who is allergic to chicken eggs. When she asked a farmer about acquiring duck eggs, the farmer began saving them for her and delivered them by car to her during the winter months when the farmers market was closed. These examples characterize the possible service type rewards customers enjoyed as result of the direct exchange with farmers. Farmers get to know customers and then are well positioned to provide them personalized service.

Trust. Like other studies have shown, trust was at the center of the customer-farmer relationship. Trust at the market often relates to knowing how a farmer produced a product. For instance, Matt said:

You can ask them [farmers] questions, you can get more information and more finely detailed information...So there is a level of trust.... there’s a lot more trust.

Similarly, Angela reported: “I know not only that they [farmers] have good methods, but also that I agree with their overall philosophy about how plants and land and animals should be treated.” Irene commented that some farmers are not certified organic but advertise things like no spray or no chemicals. Irene trusts the farmers: “I believe they don’t spray it.... I trust them very...I never have a problem.” Similarly, Carlo said:

There are some things what you could trust from a farmer that you take for granted, that what they are doing is good, that they are not abusing the animals....You just trust it, because they are ready to sell it to your face—they are ready to give you a product and smile.

Jaclyn said:

There’s an inherent tendency to trust someone that you’ve met more than someone you haven’t met.... you make certain assumptions that you can trust that person more. Sometimes you’re totally wrong. But you make those assumptions, you do, and you don’t ever have that opportunity in a large store.

Customers seem to trust farmers because they have that direct, FTF interaction.

Farmers garner trust in different ways. Some farmers have photos of the farm, others invite customers out to the farm, and yet other farmers have clear labeling and pamphlets describing their products. One farmer, Jean, said:

We have a collection of photos so when somebody who we don’t know approaches our booth we’ll say, “Hey, can we show you our operation and our farm.”... we do show them sort of what we spend our time doing.

Similarly, Reggie feels his customers trust in the quality of his honey. If he has a unique variety, he will tell customers. Reggie said:

They [customers] do realize that there is a difference between what you can get from a commercial source... if I do have a particular honey that comes from a certain nectar source, I’ll tell them that. I’ll either write it on the jar or write it somewhere.

Overall, customers talk about the high level of trust they can get at the farmers’ market and contrast that with the lack of ability to gain trust at the grocery store. Many of these customers have framed the argument in such a way that demonstrates that the alternatives (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; Emerson, 1976; Roloff, 1981) to shopping at the farmers market is not as good. This reaffirms in part why they shop in this outlet.

Of course, trust is not a guarantee, even at the farmers’ market. For instance, Sheryl bought a product that had been processed with a chemical that she is allergic to. This chemical was not labeled on the product, and Sheryl got sick after consuming the product. She lost confidence in that farmer’s knowledge of his product. Similarly, Angela said: “The trust comes in though, because in some ways there’s no way we could know.... they could just be spraying every day.” A customer’s trust in a farmer is contingent on the farmer providing transparency and clear communication about the product.

Accountability. Another theme customers mentioned that directly related to trust was accountability. Accountability, in this setting, refers to checks and balances that encourage farmers to do what they claim. For instance, the consumer Matt said:

There's more accountability.... There should be at least a level of verifiability... if they tell me that they don't spray and they do spray, and I find that out, there's repercussions for them...It's the whole reason farmers' markets exist. One reason. To give the sense of accountability to people.

Several factors encourage accountability. For instance, Jaclyn said:

I think you assume that they're going to be more honest in their product because they're meeting you face-to-face. They really do have a reputation invested.

Likewise, Brady talked about knowing how to isolate food borne illness: "You get a bad piece of meat from a local rancher, well, you know exactly who to look at." Angela said:

There's also something about actually seeing the faces of your customers, too. There's the positive and negative. The negative would be the threat—negative reinforcement to keep doing well. Maybe I just want to believe that because there's a relationship.

Customers also believe there is a community safety net that maintains accountable producers. In other words, the farmers' market community of vendors and managers encourages accountability. Matt said: "There's also the community surrounding that, so other vendors can tell us 'Well, they're [another farmer] full of shit. They say they do this but they don't.'" Similarly, Jaclyn said:

If I buy something from you and it's bad and I tell the relatively small group of people at the farmer's market, "Hey don't buy from them because that's a bad product," that could really hurt your business.... So I think you do make an assumption that there's more accountability.

Additionally, the farmers' market administration conducts an initial farm visit before admission into the market and requires all farmers to produce their products within a roughly 75 mile radius. Both the market management and other farmers have a vested interest in maintaining accountability and trust, so customers gain confidence by talking to other farmers.

Accountability can also be realized if customers visit the farm and witness production if. The customer Randy said:

You could go visit the farm, depending on how paranoid you were.... You might want to see something for yourself. You might want to check it out....Most of them are very happy to have you come out because they want to form relationships with you, and if they're savvy, they know that the better the relationship with you, the more likely you're going to be there buying stuff from them.

Additionally, every fall the farmers' market advertises and supports a county farm tour organized by numerous local food groups. Many of the farmers at the market participate.

Overall, one of the strongest rewards for consumers concerned about food safety and food quality is that they gain greater trust in the source of their food by forming a relationship with the grower and learning about production methods. The fact that customers might switch allegiances if they find out that the farmer is dishonest about growing methods was reflected in Matt's comment that there are "repercussions" for farmers who are found out captures the related accountability theme. As exchange theory suggests, trust is a foundation for the routinized, stable exchange that benefits both parties (Blau, 1986).

Regularity. Since trust undergirds a stable exchange, it is no surprise that regularity and being able to have a reliable source of local food is a reward that customers enjoyed at the market. Being a "regular" patron of a particular farmer means coming on a weekly or bi-weekly basis and patronizing the same vendors repeatedly. Many customers often fall into the habit of finding a farmer who they unofficially designate as their producer for a particular crop or product, and this also relates to receiving customized service. For example, Irene said: "Anyone that goes to the market, they have certain vendors they go to. I always get my honey from Reggie." Likewise, Deborah said: "You sort of identify, 'Okay, so this is going to be the melon guy this summer.'" Peter said, "I'm kind of a creature of habit and so I do go to the same people." Regularity often entails relational interdependence (Rusbult et al., 1994; Stafford & Canary, 2006). Deborah said: "I've just sort of come to depend on them and come to know them for certain things." Carlo referred to his relationship with farmers as "a loose partnership of some sort...like a friendly business partnership." Customers rely on farmers to provide them top-notch products, and farmers rely on customers to purchase those products that are labor intensive to grow. Regularity allows for the relationship development, loyalty, and interdependence, and as others have said, "relational stability" (McGrath et al., 1993, p. 304).

The reward for being a regular customer may be the increased customized service mentioned above, but it is also involves having reliable access to high quality food products. On the flip side, the cost of

regularity can be the obligation customers sometimes feel about needing to support farmers, and this will be discussed further below.

The reward of regularity for the farmer is a loyal customer base that consumes regularly and reduces the risk of producing a labor-intensive product. However, the regularity or relational stability is challenged if the farmer is not at the market on a weekly basis, or as is the case sometimes at the DLFM, the farmer does not have the same booth from week-to-week. Farmers at this market strongly desire to get a consistent stall so they can build this sense of regularity. The vendors who have come for several years have gained a “permanent” vendor status, whereas new vendors at the market are considered “floaters” and must go wherever the market manager can find them a spot.

Utilitarian Shoppers. While not a reward, it is important to briefly note that consumers engage in these social rewards at varying levels. For instance, a subset of customers is more utilitarian in their approach to market interactions and are less interested in the social rewards. For instance, Helen said: “I go and get my stuff, and I’m in and out in like five or ten minutes....For me it’s the exact same as going to the grocery store.” Similarly, Jack said: “I don’t think of anyone that I met at farmer’s market because of the vendor-seller relationship, at all.” Deborah, who has been going to the market for around six years, said: “I don’t chat em’ up.... I don’t really know any of these people on a personal basis.” These utilitarian shoppers who view the market merely as an economic exchange (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; Roloff, 1981) hardly engage in relationship building at all, with many of these shoppers not even knowing farmers’ names. These customers might relate to what others have classified as die-hard shoppers (McGrath et al., 1993) or those who are primarily product oriented (McNeill & Hale, 2016).

Costs of Increased Consumer-Farmer Communication

Research question two examined the potential consumer costs that resulted from an increased direct customer-farmer interaction and communication. Two costs emerged: obligation and rude farmers. These negative cases help form a more robust picture of the customer-farmer relationship by avoiding the tendency to over-romanticize this connection.

Obligation. Some customers who formed relationships with farmers developed a sense of obligation to consume a certain amount of products to support a farmer. For instance, Carlo stated:

You feel that they expect a certain amount of consumption from you. I don’t know, it’s weird, I don’t know. I don’t know they are like, after you buy it, if you buy a certain number of times maybe you’re a regular and you kind of feel at least you have to stop by and say hello....you feel like you have a standing appointment with a friend.

Carlo also explains how asking farmers questions sometimes entails an obligatory purchase: “I made a decision in my head, I took up her time and customers came by, so maybe I’ll get something small.” If Carlo cannot attend the market, he said: “I feel like I’ve disappointed them.” Similarly, Sheryl said: “My problem is that I become friends with so many vendors that I have this dilemma of, who am I going to buy my onions from this week?” Angela said: “We do feel guilt if we miss the farmers’ market.” Obligation and awkward feelings can develop among some customers who have developed friendships with farmers. Obligation, indebtedness, and reciprocity are central features of a social exchange (Blau, 1986; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005), so it is not surprising that some customers feel bad if they aren’t consuming on a regular basis. Of course, there is no formal agreement in most cases; obligation springs out of the implicit exchange and relationship that has developed. For the utilitarian customers mentioned above, these exchanges are primarily economic, and thus they will likely experience little-to-no guilt if they fail to purchase from a particular farmer on a given week.

Rude Farmers. While most farmers display a positive smile and engaging front, some farmers do not. During my interviews, several customers commented on a particular farmer’s booth as being staffed with unpleasant workers. Angela said,

There is the one group that we do buy from every single week, and we buy a lot from them because they have a lot. But they’re not very nice. We’re put off by it just about every week...We don’t really talk to them that much...They must love farming but they don’t like people.

Matt said, “We still buy stuff...we still go even though they’re kind of dicks [derogatory meaning intended]. Similarly, Peter commented about how the owner of the booth was rude: “My favorite stand, though, the guy that runs it is about as unfriendly as can be.” Peter supports this vendor’s stand because he has befriended one of the owner’s employees. Peter said also: “They’ve got top notch organic vegetables and there’s no substitute; they’re doing it for real....I just want to support them.” People purchase vegetables from this vendor despite the rude customer service because the quality of the produce is excellent.

The rude farmer flouts the farmers’ market convention of being a friendly place to shop, and this is a type of exchange violation that should be met with social disapproval (Blau, 1986; Roloff, 1981). But the fact that consumers continue to patronize this farmer’s stall indicates that he has power or a valuable resource that consumers need (Blau, 1986; Roloff, 1981), which in this case is his “top-notch organic vegetables.” For these customers, the rewards of remaining in this exchange relationship still outweigh the social costs of dealing with the rudeness. If the market grows and more vendors provide an equally good product with a more friendly communication pattern, consumers may switch allegiances and shop from someone else.

Discussion

This paper rests on the premise that farmers’ markets provide greater social interaction between seller and buyer compared to supermarkets. This increased communication and social interaction between producer and consumer yields several rewards and costs for consumers. In mapping these rewards and costs, previous research has been both confirmed and also extended by adding new categories. But unlike most analyses of farmers’ markets that have provided a shallow treatment of the relational benefits of market exchanges, this analysis adds depth to the understanding of the relational costs and rewards in this exchange.

There were many rewards that customers reported receiving at this market as a result of an increased interaction with farmers that were also echoed in the literature: the face-to-face, social aspect of the market, customized service, trust, accountability, and the relational stability that is generated by regularity. Other concepts such as customer feedback are mentioned in the literature but were not a significant theme in this sample of customers.

In addition to corroborating existing data, this research has generated a more in-depth understanding of these rewards. For instance, I have demonstrated that the “social” aspect of farmers’ markets (as it is referred to in the literature) has multiple dimensions, including that customers form new friendships, maintain pre-existing friendships, and gain various types of social support from farmers. Customers also gain social interaction with other customers, but that is outside the scope of this analysis. This research has focused specifically on the consumer to farmer interaction patterns.

Further, while the existing literature highlighted the importance of trust, this research has gone beyond that simple definition to include the consumer notion of accountability as intricately linked to trust. Others have found that the related concept of food traceability is also important at markets (Wolf et al., 2005). As discussed above, consumers increasingly fear how their food was produced (Paarlberg, 2010; Winne, 2008; Winter, 2003), and they perceived that the farmers’ market provides a safer way to eat ethically and healthfully.

A final extension of the previous literature is the addition of social costs that consumers face when shopping in a personal way. In the existing farmers’ market literature, the author could find very little in the way of research that discussed the negative aspects of an increased personal relationship with farmers. Some discussion of conflict during election season has been referenced elsewhere (Robinson & Hartenfeld, 2007) and also that local food can advertise environmental benefits of shopping locally that may not always be accurate (Born & Purcell, 2006). Negative attributes are also sometimes explored in the form of reasons for not shopping at markets. For example, in one analysis, consumers reported that some of the main reasons they did not attend markets were that they were inconveniently located, held at inconvenient times, and had poor parking (Wolf et al., 2005). Another study (Alonso & O’Neill, 2011) looked at the dimensions of the market consumers want to change, such as providing a longer selling season, more product variety, and more vendors. However, the present study has gone further in terms of mapping out the social costs of a more personal shopping interaction by charting instances of guilt and obligation that can develop.

This finding is not surprising from one vantage point because social exchange theory predicts obligation in committed exchange relationships (Blau, 1986; Roloff, 1981). But these negative attributes have not been applied to farmers' market interactions. This has left the impression that all market interactions are positive, which is not the case. In some ways, it is not surprising that consumers enjoy varied levels of friendships with farmers, since previous studies (McGrath et al., 1993; McNeill & Hale, 2016) have shown that some customers are primarily product focused. Here, I have also added to our understanding of these utilitarian shoppers in greater depth by highlighting the way they view their market relationships.

Theoretically, the customers who reported social costs of obligation towards farmers and the negative interactions with rude farmers provided the most interesting cases. To reflect back on a few of these customer comments, Angela used the word "guilt" and Carlo said: "I feel like I've disappointed them." According to social exchange theory, feelings of guilt and obligation often result from the customers' perception of an imbalance in the informal exchange agreement (Blau, 1986; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; Roloff, 1981). In other words, customers sometimes perceived that they did not reciprocate their end of the bargain and felt bad about it. But again, not all customers will experience guilt, either because of personality differences or because their relationships with the farmers are different.

On the other hand, it is somewhat surprising that customers would continue to shop from rude farmers, especially since the overall perception of farmers' markets is that it is a friendly and social space. The rude behaviors identified here are seemingly at odds with farmers' markets' reputation. Again, social exchange theory helps explain why some customers continue to purchase from the rude farmer, and that is because the benefits they get in terms of a high quality food product outweigh the negative social interaction. This would suggest that the quality of the food is a more important factor than the social interaction for the customers who continue to patronize the rude farmer. This fact is consistent with surveys that routinely find customers' primary reason for shopping is to obtain a high quality product (Andreatta & Wickliffe, 2002; Wolf et al., 2005). On the other hand, other customers in this study purchased food just because the vendor was their friend, even if the taste was only ok. Needless to say, consumers' social and utilitarian goals are complex, sometimes contradictory, and influence their purchasing habits in multiple ways.

Those with power in a relationship are able to flout reciprocity norms and can get away with imbalanced exchange (Roloff, 1981). This explains why the rude farmer can offend people and still be financially successful. This particular farmer has one of the best and largest vegetable stands at the market and has sold for many years, so people know and rely on his product. The limited supply of high-quality, organic produce and the customer demand at this market means that for the time being, this farmer has the power to be rude to customers and still receive regular patronage. This could change as more friendly farmers enter the market with equally high-quality products and increase competition.

This analysis addressed the rewards and costs of direct interaction with farmers from the consumers' perspective. Previously discovered social benefits were cataloged and organized in greater depth and charted new concepts for future researchers to explore. Importantly, I have also examined the potential social costs of FTF communication with farmers, which was previously unexplored. This data will help future scholars to avoid romanticizing customer-farmer relationships without also showing the potential costs of this direct interaction.

This study has several limitations and opportunities for future research. First, the comments and themes developed represent the perceptions of the 19 participants and not the entire market. This study's aim was not population representativeness, but theoretical representativeness (Charmaz, 2006). While researchers would likely find similar themes at markets that also emphasize local food production, this would undoubtedly vary from market to market. It is important to note that there are different types of shoppers (McGrath et al., 1993; McNeill & Hale, 2016). I highlighted some cases of customers who were utilitarian in focus, but it is important to mention that the benefits discussed are contingent upon a customer's motivation to be social and interact with farmers. Thus, customers will capitalize on the benefits to varying degrees.

Future studies could examine when and why customers choose to switch allegiances and patronize different farmers. More work also needs to be done to further understand negative emotions such as obligation and guilt in this space. More broadly, this work suggests a consumer tension between having a personal relationship with a farmer and wanting to purchase the best quality product. These values are sometimes in tension. As demonstrated above, there are costs and rewards to having a direct relationship with

the owner or vendor. Future research could explore this tension across different industries and in other small businesses.

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