

# Consumers in local food markets: from adoption to market co-creation?

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# **Consumers in local food markets: From adoption to market co-creation.**

## **Abstract**

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to explore the consumer adoption literature on local food. This study discusses the applicability of traditional models of adoption and diffusion to understanding new phenomena such as the development of local food networks.

**Design/methodology/approach** – A systematic review of the literature on the adoption and diffusion of local food systems was conducted.

**Findings** – Three main challenges within literature on the adoption and diffusion of local food are identified: the lack of a clear definition of what constitutes local food; divergent market assumptions; and divergent consumer assumptions. In addition, this study points to the need for new perspectives on consumer adoption and diffusion of local food practices.

**Originality/value** – This paper provides an overview of current local food research streams and contributes to the literature on consumer adoption and diffusion of local food consumption.

**Keywords** - local food phenomena, literature review, consumer adoption, diffusion, market creation, market system dynamics

**Paper type** – Literature review

## Introduction

Consumers increasingly want to know where their food comes from, how it was made, and by whom. Accordingly, there is a growing interest in shopping and consuming locally produced foods and in participating in direct producer-consumer cooperatives (Schermer, 2015), which has fuelled the development of new alternative local food systems (De Bernardi and Tirabeni, 2018), such as food assemblies, community supported agriculture (CSA), *Associations de Maintien de l'Agriculture Paysanne*, solidarity purchasing groups, and various boxed food options. Recently, online local food markets called REKO-rings<sup>1</sup> have emerged in Scandinavian countries. REKO-rings are networks of producers, consumers, and administrators who facilitate producer-consumer interactions that have been co-created by stakeholders over time without traditional intermediaries (Humphreys and Grayson, 2008). The question of whether these recent local food phenomena are truly co-created practices, rather than consumers adopting suppliers' predefined offerings, has emerged naturally at the intersection between the market system dynamics literature and the alternative local food market adoption/diffusion literature.

Numerous practices, networks, and movements have been investigated in "local food" consumer research (Hinrichs, 2000, Holloway et al., 2006, Toler et al., 2009, Cucco and Fonte, 2015, Munjal et al., 2016), including consumer perceptions and preferences for local and organic food and the sustainability of different types of alternative food networks (Feldmann and Hamm, 2015, Hughner et al., 2007, Michel-Villarreal et al., 2019). In this research, the markets in which adoption and diffusion take place are considered to consist of

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<sup>1</sup> REKO is an abbreviation for "Rejäl konsumtion" which translates into "sincere consumption". REKO is a platform for local food markets based on many direct food distribution concepts.

individuals, or segments of consumers, who perform well-structured behaviours in response to suppliers' and intermediaries' innovations.

Traditional marketing scholars often apply the theory of planned behaviour (Ajzen, 1991) and the diffusion of innovation model (Rogers, 2003) to explain how consumers react to market innovations. These theories offer tremendous insights into why consumers choose to adopt particular product and service offerings, and how such offerings are diffused in aggregate markets. However, they were developed at a time when innovation was thought of as simply new products and standardized services, the consumer-producer relationship was clear and well-defined, and there was a firm-driven market development process (Kristensson et al., 2020). In the traditional conception of value creation, consumers are market actors outside the firm that the firm captures value from, while value creation originates from inside the firm.

The purpose of this article is to investigate the role of the consumer in local food market developments, applying an understanding of value co-creation as the joint creation of value by the company and the customer (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004). (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004)practice development (McColl-Kennedy et al., 2010) and production (Ranjan and Read, 2016). We propose a contrasting view on consumer adoption and market creation based on a market system dynamics perspective wherein markets are viewed as social, multilevel systems in which value is co-created by consumers and producers (Giesler and Fischer, 2016). According to this view, market creation and development are the result of discursive negotiations of market practices among multiple stakeholders, including market-shaping consumers (Giesler and Fischer, 2016 p.3)

It is unclear whether the traditional perspective on adoption and diffusion can be applied to understanding recent developments in local food markets. Thus, here, we investigate how contrasting views on the role of consumers are reflected in the literature on local food

adoption and diffusion. We structure the research streams on local food and offer new perspectives on how local food adoption and diffusion can be studied. The present review article is organized into four sections: a description of the methods and descriptive statistics; key insights; a discussion of the challenges of consumer research on the adoption of local food; and suggested implications for future research.

## **Methods**

We collated 53 articles on consumer adoption of local food published in 38 journals, which we grouped into three journal categories: marketing and economics (26.5%), econometrics and statistics (19%); and other (54.5%). The procedure, screening process, and some descriptive statistics of the collated literature are presented below.

### *Procedure*

We conducted a title/keyword/abstract search in two search engines for articles focusing on the adoption and diffusion of alternative local food markets from 2000 through 2019 with the following search terms: “local food” OR “organic food” OR “community supported agriculture” OR “food movement” OR “food systems” AND (adoption OR diffusion). We obtained an initial sample of 142 records in EBSCOhost and 78 records in Scopus. For our systematic review, we selected search terms intended to capture *consumer*-oriented local food literature specifically. This approach complements previous reviews focusing on the breadth of the local food phenomenon (Feldmann and Hamm, 2015). To avoid missing relevant articles from other sources, in accordance with West and Bogers (2014) recommendations, we identified the article on local food most cited by relevant articles in the field; that article (Hinrichs, 2000), published in the *Journal of Rural Studies*, has >1600 citations and 32 records citing this article were yielded with our search terms.

To further ensure that articles with a market system dynamics perspective were included, we conducted an additional search with the terms: “market system dynamics” OR “market creation” OR “market emergence” AND “local food”. This search yielded four additional articles (Kjeldgaard et al., 2016, Press et al., 2014, Thompson and Coskuner-Balli, 2007, Weijo et al., 2018). After eliminating overlapping articles, we had collated a total of 256 records from EBSCO (142), Scopus (78), the most highly cited article (32), and our additional search addressing consumer- or market creation perspectives in local food (4). This broad research domain was limited to peer-reviewed journals because they are considered to be validated and potentially impactful in the field (Crossan and Apaydin, 2010)

### *Screening*

We applied a three-stage approach to systematically reviewing the articles. In the *first stage*, all 256 collated abstracts were manually reviewed, leading to the elimination of 130 records that were duplicates, not research articles (book chapters, commentaries, and theses), not focused on direct agricultural markets as defined by Hinrichs (2000), or predominantly concerned with nutrition and health. In the *second stage*, the remaining 126 articles were classified as addressing (n = 53) or not addressing (n = 73) consumers to fulfil our aim of elucidating consumer roles. If it was unclear whether the article concerned the role of consumers from the abstract, the articles were read in full. In the *third stage*, the 53 articles in the former category were read in full by the authors and found adequate for content analysis.

Insert Figure 1 here

### *Descriptive statistics: Journals, research design, and theoretical perspectives*

We applied Page and Schirr (2008) classification principles for our descriptive statistics. Both authors individually considered each article, and classified each by journal and research

design. The 53 included articles, published in 38 different journals, are summarized in Table 1.

Insert table 1 here

Regarding research design (Table 2), 67.5% of the studies applied quantitative research designs, typically with variance designs dealing with change-associated covariation among dependent and independent variables. For example, Guido et al. (2014) studied marketplace reality through the role of ethical dimensions and product personality in purchasing intentions for organic food products, and Krystallis et al. (2006) applied a conjoint analysis investigating consumer willingness to pay for a variety of organic products. Both studies were delimited to a specified time and space. A qualitative research design, focusing on longitudinal design from a processual perspective on change was applied in 22.5% of the studies. For example, Kjeldgaard et al. (2016) used multiple methods over a five-year period to understand the Danish beer market and its transformation, and (Press et al., 2014) applied a socio-historical analysis to explain how community supported agricultural programs have gained legitimacy.

Insert Table 2 here

## **Key insights**

In further article categorization, we focused on definitions of local food (elaborated immediately hereafter), the assumptions made about market functions (section two) and consumer rationales (section three).

### *Exploring the definitions of local food: What is local food?*

Local food means different things to different people, including among local food researchers. Many studies have focused on defining the term “local” (see Feldmann and Hamm, 2015, e.g.

Eriksen, 2013). The published definitions are quite disparate (see Table 3), consistent with the evolving and heterogeneous state of local food research. We did not set out to propose a universal definition of “local” in local food, but rather explored the complexity of the term.

Terms employed by authors examining aspects of local food adoption include “organic food”, “organic processes”, “processed organic food”, “local consumer food movements”, “slow food”, “food sovereignty”, “CSA”, “alternative food networks”, “alternative food system”, and “direct consumer/producer markets”. It appears that local food research can be viewed through different lenses depending on the role of proximity, such as spatial distances and relationships between producers and consumers. To shed light on the role of proximity, including nearness in space, time, and relationships, we applied Boschma (2005) five-dimensional proximity framework (Table 4) in our content analysis. Applying this framework, we identified three predominant local food adoption perspectives, elaborated below: a *productionist lens*, a *consumer movement lens*, and an *alternative network/system lens*<sup>2</sup>.

## Insert Table 4 Here

### *"Local" as a food product/production characteristic: The productionist lens*

The productionist lens was highly represented in research on organic food, organic processes, and organic production. Typically, such research addresses various product characteristics or production schemes, often as part of the “organic” labelling. Through this lens, researchers define organically produced food as also having the qualities of being “local” and “small scale”, and we find that the terms “local” and “organic” are partly treated as overlapping (Williams and Hammitt, 2000, Underhill and Figueroa, 1996). Some studies (e.g. Migliore et al., 2015) identify “organic” as a quality criterion recognised by consumers. Thus, assuming

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<sup>2</sup> See Appendix 1 for a classification of the reviewed articles according to these lenses.



there is not always an overlap, we find that this lens has an implicit boundary-spanning perspective on local food and organic food. One explanation for the overlap is that early advocates of organic food focused on the production characteristics of local food (Adams and Salois, 2010). As such, research employing a productionist lens often examines the commodification of organic agriculture, organic food production, and consumer behaviour related to organic food (i.e. Olson, 2017, Ramesh and Divya, 2015, Vindigni et al., 2002). The high percentage of reviewed articles (70%) in this category suggests that research on local food in the context of organic food, organic processes, and organic production is very well established in the literature on consumer adoption and diffusion of local food.

In this perspective, “organic” and “local”, alone or together, are associated with added value relative to industrialist agricultural products. Adams and Salois (2010) propose dividing organic into “deep organic” and “organic lite” to clarify the overlap of and distinction between “local” and “organic”. A proximal location is an attribute that is valued for both “local food” and “deep organic food”, but not integral to “organic lite food” (Adams and Salois, 2010). As such, spatial distance is an implicit element of localness whereas *organizational* proximity is an explicit element of local food. That is, a close producer-consumer relationship is anchored in the same type of hierarchic control found in organizations (see Batte et al., 2007, Hughner et al., 2007, Thøgersen and Zhou, 2012).

#### *"Local" as a food ideology/identity: The consumer movements lens*

The consumer movements lens was characteristic of articles in the “local food movements”, “slow food”, and “food sovereignty” research streams. The authors of such articles interpret local food as being linked to the formation of local, national, and international social movements concerned with food and agriculture, and investigations of *how* they have developed in recent decades (see i.e. Holt Giménez and Shattuck, 2011). Typically, studies applying a consumer movement lens investigate the influence of consumer movements that

may define local food through protests, rallies, boycotts, and alternative lifestyle expressions related to local food adoption (Weijo et al. (2018). For example, Ayres and Bosia (2011) consider local food adoption to be a localized resistance against globalization, and investigate strategies of localism or relocalization opposing neoliberal globalization. Following the proximity framework of Boschma (2005), the “local” element in this literature is based on the *social* and *cognitive* proximity that actors attribute to local food. For example, in a study investigating food sovereignty in US food movements based on the shared values in the consumer movement, Alkon and Mares (2012) define local food as an articulation of efforts for attaining food justice in the community.

*“Local” as a food practice/activity: The alternative network/system lens*

Studies applying an alternative network/system lens of local food adoption are found in the alternative markets and networks research streams (see i.e. Holloway et al., 2006, Toler et al., 2009). Research into alternative local food networks/local food systems advocates for a more *direct* market form (i.e. Hinrichs, 2000, Toler et al., 2009), wherein participants are united in prioritizing locality/region and (at least) temporary co-location (face-to-face interactions) (Schermer, 2015, Hinrichs, 2000). In line with co-creative practices theory (e.g. McColl-Kennedy et al., 2012), research applying this lens emphasizes how customers can contribute to value creation through their own activities.

Research employing this lens emphasizes both formal (law, regulation) and informal (cultural norms and values) institutions in explaining how and why institutional structures may provide a basis for differential development quality among networks and markets (Hinrichs, 2003, Sundbo, 2013, Donner et al., 2017). In such research, proximity is discussed across a range of domains. Spatial locality, direct relations, face-to-face interaction, place of origin, traceability, authenticity, freshness, and quality attributes are considered dimensions of “local” in local

food adoption. Thus, authors' understandings of local food are defined by *geographical* proximity as well as by *social*, *cognitive*, and *institutional* proximity.

### *Market assumptions: Modes of examining market emergence and change*

The articles in our sample vary in terms of the authors' explicit and implicit market and consumer assumptions, which are dependent on the lens applied. The lens applied may also influence *level of analysis*, *units of analysis*, and *research design*.

#### *Productionist lens*

In terms of *level of analysis*, local food research applying a productionist lens is attentive to theoretical attention directed at how consumers and firms think, and the forces that shape their thinking and behaviour (i.e. Vindigni et al., 2002, Batte et al., 2007). There is a tendency towards favouring more specific micro-level theoretical questions. For example, (Krystallis et al., 2006) explore organic buyers' (Greek locals) willingness to pay for a variety of organic products in local product categories.

In research applying a productionist lens, the *units of analysis* tend to be restricted to only consumers and producers, leaving out other individual and institutional actors. For example, Thøgersen and Zhou (2012) investigate what motivated the early adopters of organic food in a local context in China. Further, research based in a productionist lens tends to focus on investigating marketplace circumstances *within* a certain time and place. Consequently, authors employ a *research design* that captures covariation among dependent and independent variables over a period of change. For example, Ramesh and Divya (2015) study consumers' awareness, attitudes, and satisfaction regarding selecting organic food products with reference to a local Indian market. The validity of conclusions from these designs relies on the pre-

existence of a marketplace composed of stable entities (actors, products, stores etc.), while market development and emergence imply variability in the attributes of these entities.

#### *Consumer movement lens*

Research on local food applying a consumer movement lens tends to emphasize macro-level theoretical questions and concerns, without focusing on multi-level relationships (micro-, meso-, macro) when it comes to the *level of analysis*. For example, Fairbairn (2012) addresses the food sovereignty movement as having transformative potential in a US context, placing emphasis on ethical consumption at the macro level. In terms of *units of analysis*, consumer movement research on local food often involves observation of behaviours of micro level agents, and an aggregation of findings as a collection of socially embedded relationships among agents at a macro level. Thus, the *research design* applied in this perspective is often process oriented. For example, in an ethnographical longitudinal process study, Alkon and Mares (2012) undertook two years of extensive participant observation to address how and why markets emerge and develop over time.

#### *Alternative network/system lens*

In literature applying an alternative network/system lens, the focus is on unpacking the relationships among micro-, meso- and macro *levels of analysis* (Holloway et al., 2006, Giesler, 2008, Kjeldgaard et al., 2016, Humphreys, 2010). Consequently, the *units of analysis* cover multiple stakeholders, including market-shaping consumers. In terms of *research design*, processes are examined over various periods of time based on numerous sources of data. For example McAdam et al. (2016) adopt a subjective and multiple story milieu positioning consistent with a phenomenological inquiry to explore regional horizontal networks within the small- and medium-sized enterprise agri-food sector. The researchers became immersed in the network through detailed interviewing and observation over 27 months, with a focus on understanding how networks and associated actors emerge, develop,

and dissipate over time. Problematizing the boundaries between market systems, market actors, and time, the authors view markets as dynamic social systems.

### *Consumer assumptions: Understanding consumer engagement with local food*

As with organic food, the rationales for consumer engagement with local food may be structured around nine themes (Hughner et al., 2007) including six that are *egoistic* (health and nutrition; superior taste; food safety; more wholesome food; nostalgia; fashionable/curiosity) and three that are *altruistic* (concern for the environment; animal welfare; supporting local economy).

### *Productionist lens*

Commonly, research on local food employing a productionist lens investigates consumers individual needs and the *egoistic motives* that drive consumer preferences. Because consumers often associate organic food with small-scale agriculture and local production, altruistic motives become secondary and implicit considerations. For example, although Hooker and Shanahan (2012) focus on health and nutrition concerns to explain consumers' willingness to pay for organic products, their work incorporates the characteristic of "locally grown".

### *Consumer movement lens*

In the literature applying a consumer movement lens, we find research explicitly focusing on *altruistic motives*, with the common themes of environmental concern, concerns about animal welfare, and support for the local economy. Such research describes these movements as being driven by resolute and persistent efforts by organized consumer collectives.

Consequently, egoistic motives are often secondary and implicit in these studies. Munjal et al. (2016) find the slow food movement to be about knowing the source of meal-preparation

ingredients and consumers' rights to have nutritious food without contaminants. Alkon and Mares (2012) argue that the concept of food sovereignty is rooted in international peasant movements across the USA, with altruistic motives anchored in themes such as food justice and community food security.

#### *Alternative network/system lens*

Typically, local food research employing an alternative network/system lens focuses on market models that are transitioning to more sustainable local and regional food systems via changes in culture and consumption practices. For example, Fairbairn (2012) describe food sovereignty (consumers being convinced that the people who produce, distribute, and consume food should control the mechanisms and policies of food production and distribution) as having transformative potential in the US, placing emphasis on ethical consumption. (Schermer, 2015) examined direct producer-consumer cooperatives (CSAs and *Associations de Maintien de l'Agriculture Paysanne*) and demonstrated how alternative food networks may contribute to food system transformation through the motivation of changing the culture of consumption. Findings indicate that food sovereignty provides a broad vision of agrifood activists engaged in creating alternatives that *result* in new market models. Considering food sovereignty as a *motive* reduces the relevance of examining individual motives as antecedents of consumer behaviour because this motive is more complex and evolves in response to changes in culture and consumption practices.

Insert Table 5 here

## **Discussion: Challenges in consumer adoption of local food research**

Our literature review revealed three perspectives in local food research and how they approach the issues of local food definition, local food market development, and the rationales of consumers in these developments. Although the application of heterogeneous perspectives to the same phenomenon is challenging, the contrasting perspectives also create opportunities for deeper understanding. Here, we discuss some of these challenges and opportunities for each of the three identified issues.

### *Defining local food: Food from nowhere, food from somewhere or food from here?*

Studies on local food often argue that the absence of a universal definition of ‘local’ is preventing standardization for “local” labelling (e.g. Eriksen, 2013, Feldmann and Hamm, 2015). We have found that the definition of local food varies depending on the lens that is applied. For example, when a productionist lens is applied in organic food research, “local” is often treated as an implicit attribute of “organic”. This practice creates challenges because organic food consumers’ may be more concerned with knowing *how* their food is grown and processed (Kloppenburger *et al.*, 1996) than *where* it is produced. Organic food could be found anywhere, even in fast food restaurants and vending machines. In contrast, research on local food employing the consumer movement or alternative network/system lenses has mapped out emergent patterns and trends that imply a general transition from “food from nowhere” to place-embedded “food from somewhere” that is traceable to the individual farmers who produce it (Thompson and Coskuner-Balli, 2007, Holloway *et al.*, 2006).

Globally, agri-food systems have undergone major changes in recent years. Along with globalisation, commodification, and de-localisation, we can observe a substantial movement

towards re-localisation (Schermer, 2015). Ethical consumerism based in ideological principles is yielding innovative marketplace practices and relationships. Distance and proximity criteria defining what can be considered local food are highly variant (Eriksen, 2013), ranging from driving time between production and consumption to ambiguous social and environmental outcomes.

### Insert Table 6 here

As summarized in Table 6, productionist lens research defines “local” in relation to the integration of organizational proximity in hierarchically organized value chains (i.e. Batte et al., 2007, Hughner et al., 2007, Thøgersen and Zhou, 2012). Meanwhile, consumer movement lens research emphasizes the proximity of economic relations embedded in a social context based on trust that facilitates exchanges and the concept of cognitive proximity, which emphasizes the role of shared knowledge in buttressing relationships among producers, distributors, and consumers. Cognitive proximity may be fundamental to network strengthening through agreements and partnerships among public and private institutions, grassroots organizations, civil society, and universities (Holt Giménez and Shattuck, 2011). The alternative network/system lens defines local food based on geographical proximity, resulting in a strong link between food and place (i.e. Cucco and Fonte, 2015, Hinrichs, 2000, Hinrichs, 2003), and closeness between consumer and producer enabling face-to-face interactions. This perspective also reflects a complex understanding of local as a descriptor of institutional, cognitive, and social proximity. Consequently, collaboration between multiple stakeholders (e.g. Munjal et al., 2016, Thompson and Coskuner-Balli, 2007, Weijo et al., 2018) is important in the alternative network/system lens.

#### *Market assumptions of local food research*

The understanding of what constitutes a market varies in the literature on consumer adoption of local food. Giesler and Fischer (2016) point to an economic actor bias, a micro-level bias,



and a variance bias "*plaguing marketing scholarship*" (p.3). When a productionist lens is applied, the *economic actor bias* affects the choices of actors and theoretical interpretations (Giesler and Fischer, 2016). For example, investigating new US food labelling standards, Batte et al. (2007) focus on adopter-developer relationships between consumers and producers in pre-existing markets. By contrast, research applying a consumer movement or an alternative network/system lens explores the creation, formation, and reshaping of markets, including market-shaping consumers. Press et al. (2014) illustrate how opposing ideologies restrict consumer adoption in transitions to organic production and marketing in a commodity agriculture context. Likewise, Thompson and Coskuner-Balli (2007) underscore the complexity of markets in an analysis of CSAs as a form of ethical consumerism organised by a nexus of ideological discourses, romantic idealizations, and unconventional marketplace practices and relationships.

Regarding the *micro-level bias* proposed by Giesler and Fischer (2016), research applying a productionist lens favours specific micro-level issues, such as consumer awareness and attitudes towards organic products in local markets (Ramesh and Divya (2015)). On the other hand, research applying the consumer movement and the alternative local network/system lens often operate at multiple levels of analysis. For example, Littaye (2015) investigates the role of organizations, institutions and networks in a multi-sited ethnographic study.

Research applying a productionist lens is also susceptible to a *variance bias*. For example, Hooker and Shanahan (2012) find that market access and intermediate input factors correlate strongly with the distribution of organic adopters. Typically, research applying the other two perspectives focuses on problematising boundaries between markets, marketplace actors, and time to explain change and development (Thompson and Coskuner-Balli, 2007, Press et al., 2014). The three biases imply that the behaviour of consumers and producers co-creating new local food markets needs to be explored with new theories. Research applying a consumer

movement lens often addresses predefined movements, such as the food sovereignty and slow food movements (e.g. Alkon and Mares, 2012, Ayres and Bosia, 2011, Munjal et al., 2016). In such research, consumer movements are explored and interpreted as resolute and persistent efforts by organised consumer collectives to change markets and theoretical perspectives in which markets are viewed as multilevel systems are favoured (Weijs et al., 2018). For example, Kjeldgaard et al. (2016) examine how consumers can work strategically to alter market dynamics through evolution in the logics of competition within the Danish beer market. Thompson and Coskuner-Balli (2007) analysis of CSAs takes a different approach based on ethical consumerism. Studies applying theories of value co-creation in an alternative network/system perspective may further complement this understanding of emergence and development of local food markets as they have for other markets, such as public transport (Gebauer et al., 2010) and tourism (Lin et al., 2017).

#### *Understanding the consumer in research on consumer adoption of local food*

Crises of confidence (Veflen et al., 2017), such as the bovine spongiform encephalopathy, dioxin, and foot and mouth disease crises, have led consumers to question food production practices and to demand greater transparency and information about food origins (Bànàti, 2011). According to Hughner et al. (2007) review, people's motivations for purchasing organic food and consumers' increasing interest in food origins have not been sufficiently captured in the food-purchasing behaviour literature (p. 94).

This issue extends to research on consumer adoption of local food. The focus on individual egoistic motives in the productionist lens involves consumers' concerns with buying food that is safe, healthy, and nutritious in addition to being good tasting (Chamorro et al., 2012, Crescimanno et al., 2002, Ramesh and Divya, 2015). Consumer confidence in the conventional food industry is not strong (Bànàti, 2011). Research applying the consumer

movement lens suggests that increased interest in local food reflects disapproval of dominant food systems (Sims, 2009) motivated by consumers altruistic concerns related to the environment and animal welfare and a desire to support the local economy (Alkon and Mares, 2012, Munjal et al., 2016).

Alienation of consumers from food production due to scaling up of industrial agriculture has been suggested to play an important part in the development of an “alternative” and “local” food sector. Research employing an alternative network/system lens links the desire for food perceived as local to a shared quest for authenticity and more environmentally sustainable consumption, such as that associated with products having only travelled a short distance, directly from the producer. Alternative network/systems research has thus explored how producers and consumers can work together, bound by their interest in changing mainstream food consumption practices. In this context, markets are considered social multilevel systems in which value is co-created by consumers and producers.

## **Conclusions, limitations, and further implications**

In this article, we explore whether growth of the local food phenomenon can be better understood as being co-created by multiple stakeholders, including engaged consumers, than as growth in consumer adoption of producers’ predefined offerings. We identify three lenses applied in consumer-oriented research on the local food phenomenon: a productionist lens, a consumer movement lens; and an alternative network/system lens. Additionally, we identify three challenging issues. The first challenge identified is regarding the lack of a consensus definition of local food, especially across studies applying different lenses. Hence, researchers should always clarify which interpretation of “local” they are applying (Eriksen, 2013). The second challenge identified is the existence of divergent market assumptions among

consumer-oriented studies of local food (e.g. Hashem et al., 2018, Sims, 2009). We elaborated the differences between these lenses by considering three biases in market system dynamics Giesler and Fischer (2016) that show how a value co-creation approach can help explain why engaged consumers are influencing the creation of new local food markets. With this approach it is easier to unify divergent findings regarding market change and development across the three lenses. Lenses can also be combined to extend theoretical approaches into empirical studies of local food system development.

We have uncovered divergent consumer assumptions within local food market research that require further investigation. Future research should explore how differing local food consumer rationales across lenses translate into consumer roles and behaviour. Elucidation of such outcomes may guide follow-up empirical research and improve our understanding of the complexities of contemporary food consumerism. Studies have established the necessity of a value co-creation perspective for the development of chains, networks, constellations, flows, and services (e.g. Festa et al., 2015, Mars, 2015). Such findings are encouraging of consumer co-creation in both local food businesses and food systems.

Our attempts to ensure the validity of our conclusions notwithstanding, we acknowledge the limitations of the procedure, method of analysis, and perspective applied. Firstly, the search term design, literature databases searched, and screening procedure may have influenced the sample that we base our conclusions on. We have attempted to ensure replicability and prioritized depth over breadth. The present study would be complemented by a broader search beyond consumer-oriented literature, particularly for further identification of contextual factors within local food research, such as how study setting may affect consumers' views. Consumer rationales are likely to vary across contexts, and consumer roles in local food network initiatives may differ between regions and across different regulatory conditions. Secondly, our analysis approach is subject to influence by our personal value co-creation and

market system dynamics frames of reference. However, each author of this review identified the three lenses independently, ensuring their relevance across frames of reference. Further research applying other higher-level frames of reference, such as practice and institutional theory (e.g. Crivits and Paredis, 2013, Ertimur and Chen, 2020) may contrast, complement, and enrich the present findings. There is an overall need for applying complementary theories and models in local food research.

The most important practical implication of our study concerns the finding that “local” lacks a consensus understanding across lenses. This ambiguity is relevant for food safety and quality certifications intended to protect origin and geographical indications of local food (Hinrichs, 2016). A broader set of characteristics informed by the different lenses may advise further development of local food regulations and certification schemes that reflect the complexity of consumer rationales identified in this study. In clarifying what constitutes “local” in local food research, the three lenses may hopefully, guide future research as well as be useful for managers and practitioners in local food markets, chains, and networks.

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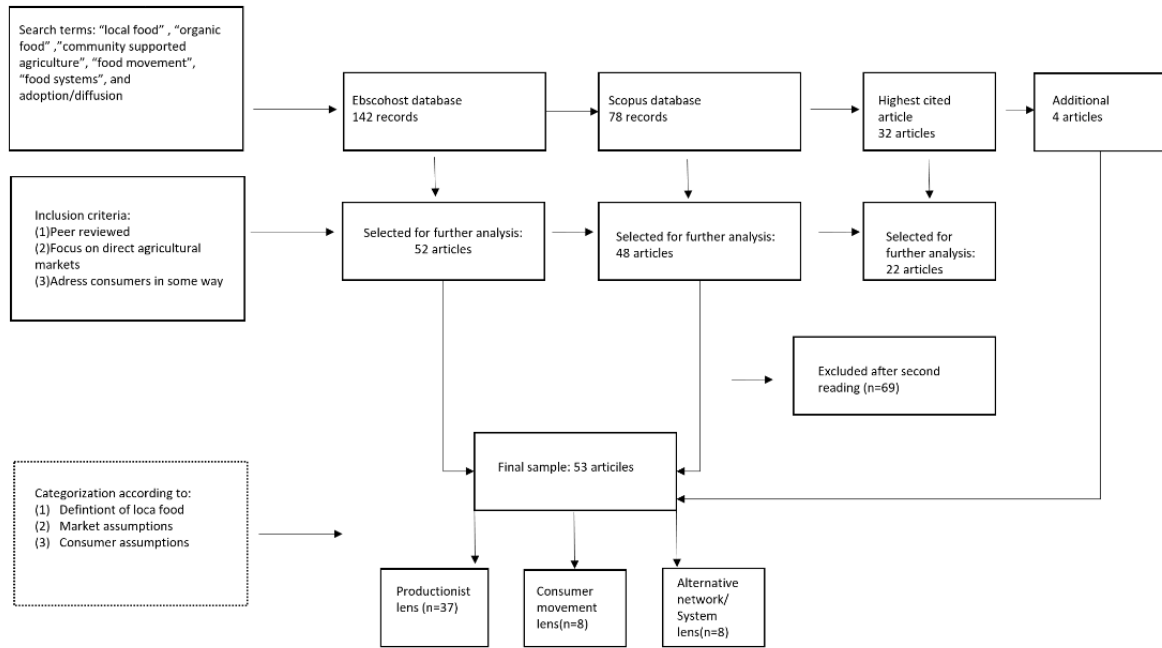
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**Figure 1.** Overview of the literature review process.