

Assessment of U.S. Consumers' Underlying Beliefs about Local Food Purchase

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ABSTRACT: The main purpose of this study is to get insight into the essential cognitive basis of local food purchase behavior based on Ajzen's (1991) theory of planned behavior. By asking open-ended questions using an online survey, participants' (n=163) salient behavioral, normative, and control beliefs in regard to local food purchase were assessed and analyzed. The most salient advantage was supporting local economy, followed by freshness, knowledge of where the food came from and how it was handled, environmental benefits, and health benefits. Assessing to consumers' normative beliefs found that local businesses, local farmers, family, local people, and friends were the most frequently mentioned individuals or groups who would approve consumers' local food purchasing. In contrast, the most salient barrier was inconvenient store location and time, followed by higher prices, limited availability and variety, and limited knowledge about where to buy local food.

Keywords: local food, theory of planned behavior, elicitation, salient beliefs

INTRODUCTION

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, people in the U.S. realized that the amount of agricultural food resources was limited and started to think various ways to adopt sustainable agriculture system. (Harwood 1990). Among the various efforts into sustainable agriculture, local food movement has become one of the most important trends. (Martinez et al 2010). Along with local food boom, multiple studies have been conducted with regards to local food. Among them, the theory of planned behavior (TPB) by Ajzen(1991) was widely used for investigating local food consumer behavior (e.g., Nurse, Onozaka & Thilmany 2010; Vermeir & Verbeke 2008). However,

most of the TPB studies regarding local food focused on finding antecedent variables to predict intentions or actual behaviors with a quantitative approach, rather than investigating the underlying reasons behind the behaviors. Namely, few studies conduct an elicitation study to examine the underlying reasons for consumer behavior regarding local food. A general goal of those studies was to predict intentions or actual behaviors, and in that case, an elicitation is not a requirement (Ajzen 1991). However, according to Ajzen (1991), it is necessary to conduct an elicitation study if a researcher wishes to find the underlying reasons of a certain behavior.

Some studies examined consumers' perceptions and beliefs about local food with a qualitative ap-

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proach (e.g., Chambers, Lobb, Butler, Harvey & Trail, 2007; Roininen, Arvola & Lahteenmaki 2006). However, few studies were conducted with U.S. consumers, or were conducted within a certain geographic area in the researchers' knowledge. In order to fill the research gap discussed above, the researchers conducted an elicitation study with 163 respondents from 30 different states to discover consumers' underlying beliefs of purchasing local food. Thus, the purpose of this study is to get insight into the essential cognitive basis of local food purchase behavior using the TPB elicitation study method.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Definition of Local Food

There is no legal definition of "local food." Some people may define local food based on geographic distance while others define local food based on regional boundary. The Consolidated Farm and Rural Development Act in 2008 defined "locally" and "regionally" are grouped together and defined as following: "(I) the locality or region in which the final product is marketed, so that the total distance that the product is transported is less than 400 miles from the origin of the product."; or "(II) the State in which the product is produced." According to Lee, Nganje & Hughner (2010), people could understand the meaning of "local" clearer with state branding. Therefore, the state boundary was used to define local food.

Theory of Planned Behavior

The theory of planned behavior (Ajzen 1991) is developed based on the theory of reasoned action (TRA) (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). The main concept of the theory of planned behavior (TPB) is that a person's behavior is affected by behavioral intention and the behavioral intention consists of attitude, subjective norm, and perceived behavioral control. The intention is the best predictor of an individual's behavior.

Attitude is a personal evaluation (either positive or negative) of a behavior. (Ajzen & Fishbein 1980; Fishbein & Ajzen 1975). Attitude is a function of behavioral beliefs, which are perceived advantages and disadvantages of the behavior and evaluations of

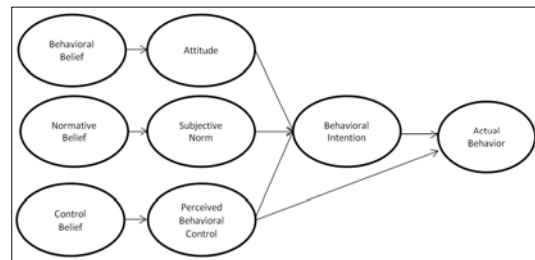


Figure 1. Theory of planned behavior (Ajzen 1991).

each outcome. Subjective norm is perceived social pressure from referent people for engaging in a behavior, and it is based on an individual's normative beliefs, which are individuals' perceptions on individuals or groups who would approve and disapprove of the behavior and their motivation to comply with the people who are important to him or her (Ajzen & Fishbein 1980; Fishbein & Ajzen 1975). Perceived behavioral control is a perceived difficulty or ease to do a certain behavior (Ajzen 1991). Perceived behavioral control is a function of control beliefs, which is a combination of person's perceived resources or obstacles to conduct a behavior and perceived capability of each belief. Figure 1 shows the full TPB model.

Attitude, subjective norm, and perceived behavioral control can be measured both directly and indirectly (Ajzen 2002c). Direct assessment is done by asking participants to rate each construct on scales while indirect assessment can be done by asking open-ended questions regarding constructs of beliefs according to the guideline suggested by Ajzen (2002a 2002c). Although the direct measures of attitude, subjective norm, and perceived behavioral control are enough if a researcher just desires to predict intentions and behavior, underlying reasons for a certain behavior cannot be examined (Ajzen 2002c). If a researcher wants to understand the foundation of those variables and get insight into the essential cognitive basis, it is recommended for the researcher to assess indirect measures, which are behavioral, normative, and control beliefs, in addition to the direct measures (Ajzen 2011). Therefore, this research investigated consumers' underlying beliefs of purchasing local food using the framework of the TPB indirect measures.

METHODOLOGY

The behavioral beliefs deal with advantages and disadvantages of performing the behavior while normative beliefs address the most important people or groups who care about the behavior. Furthermore, control beliefs are perceived barriers that would make it easy or difficult to do the behavior.

Participants

Francis and colleagues (2004) suggested to arrange a focus group, individual interview, or mailed questionnaire for an elicitation study. In this study, an online survey was conducted for three weeks from May 13 2013 through June 02 2013. An email invitation was sent out to U.S travelers through the database of The Center for Hospitality and Tourism Research. The invitations contained the description of the study's purpose, voluntary nature of participation, and the approximate length of taking the survey.

Based on the guideline provided by Francis et al (2004), the set of beliefs could be assessed by asking perceived advantages and disadvantages of conducting the behavior of interest, most important people or group who would care about doing the behavior, and what makes conducting the behavior easy or difficult. Ajzen (2002b) recommended for researchers to use open-ended questions for assessing those beliefs. The specific questions are listed as following:

1. What do you believe are the advantages of purchasing local food?
2. What do you believe are the disadvantages of purchasing local food?
3. Are there any individuals or groups who would approve of purchasing local food?
4. Are there any individuals or groups who would disapprove of purchasing local food?
5. What factors or circumstances enable you to purchase local food?
6. What factors or circumstances make it difficult or impossible for you to purchase local food?
7. Any additional comments?

Participants were also asked gender, age, marital status, income level, education level, resided state,

race, and if they have purchased local food before.

Data Analysis

A total of 163 participants responded to the survey. After collecting all responses, the sentences were picked from the survey first. Then, each sentence was attached on a note card and was categorized into three labels based on the guideline by Francis et al (2004). The three labels are behavioral beliefs (perceived outcomes), sources of social pressure (reference individuals or groups), and control belief strength (facilitators or barriers). Finally, the content of the responses were individually analyzed by the researchers.

Next, a frequency analysis was done as the guideline provided by Ajzen (2011) and Francis et al (2004) to develop a foundation for a future quantitative study to measure the contribution of the TPB variables toward local food purchase intention. According to van der Pligt and Eiser (1984), each salient belief can be adequately represented by three to five beliefs. As a result, the five items per each belief label were picked and presented in results.

RESULTS

Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents

Male respondents were 21% while female respondents were 79%. Age group 45 to 54 was 33%, followed by 55 to 64 (28%), 35 to 44 (17%), 65 or over (12%), 25 to 34 (9%), and 18 to 24 (1%). Roughly 32% of respondents was single and 59% of respondents was either engaged or married. Participants' income levels varied: \$20,000 to \$39,999 (28%), \$60,000 to \$79,999 (24%), below \$20,000 (22%), \$40,000 to \$59,999 (21%), and over \$80,000 (5%). In terms of education level, 99% of participants graduated high school. The majority of the respondents was White/Caucasian (68%), followed by African American (18%), and Hispanic (3%). In terms of local food purchase experience, 99% of participants stated that they had bought local food before. While largest response was obtained from Pennsylvania (11%), at least one or more participants' responses were obtained from 30 states.

Behavioral Beliefs

The most frequently mentioned advantage of purchasing local food was related to economic benefits to local community. As shown in Table 1, 127 out of 163 people (77%) regarded it as an advantage. The majority of respondents mentioned the economic benefits broadly as follows: "support local business," "support local economy," "good for local economy," and "support local farmers and small business." In contrast, some statements were rather more specific: "potential growth for expansion and economic development of the community," and "Helps make local areas less dependent on large corporations that might be or become foreign owned." Another respondent said, "I think it helps to sustain the local farmers in our town, you are able to buy fresher food, it brings the community together through the local Farmer's Market held on Tuesdays & Saturdays and also keeps the profits local which in some way is put back into the community/town." Also, multiple people mentioned that purchasing local food helps create jobs for local people.

Next frequently mentioned advantage of buying local food was its freshness. A total of 101 respondents out of 163 (61%) thought it was a main advantage. Sample quotes are as following: "I feel that it's fresher," "food doesn't travel too far so it's fresh," "Foods will stay fresh longer because there is limited travel time for spoilage," "Freshness and I love NJ produce!!!" and "picked at ripe, fresh."

Knowledge about the food origin was the third frequently mentioned advantage. For example, "know how the food is grown and handled," "To me, the one major advantage is knowing where the local food came from. For example, visiting your local Farmer's Market will provide you with the freshest quality veggies around and they are not treated with chemicals. As far as beef is concerned, we raise our own and they are totally organic which is wonderful," and "I am able to investigate the growing practices of my farmer, and even sometimes to the place where my food is produced so I have a bigger connection to where my food is coming from..." Approximately 41% of participants mentioned knowledge about the food origin as a key benefit of purchasing local food.

Environmental benefits (33%) and health benefits (31%) were also frequently mentioned as an advantage

of purchasing local food. Sample quotes from people who addressed environmental benefits as an advantage of buying local food are as follows: "...less carbon footprint involved in my food reaching the table," and "...saves the environment with less trucks on the road." Also, people perceived local food had health benefits: "Food that really healthy like fruit, potato all kind of meat," "Eating local foods helps with some immunization problems and some health issues," and "obtaining healthy home grown products without all the crud added to them." There were a couple of people who said local food is healthy because it is organic. However, even though all local food is not organic, some people still perceived local food is organic and accordingly, they thought it had healthy benefits.

In addition to the advantages mentioned above, there were some other advantages that were brought up: for example, comfort of local food, entertainment value of local food market, benefit in view of agricultural practices, and proximity. Sample quotes are as follows: "most people get to continue to experience the foods they grew up on and expound on local taste throughout the region," "Dining experience as well it helps entertainment venues," and "bug resistant to the area." "Some factors that help me and enable me are the locations like the farmers' market being accessible is not far away. You don't have to go all the way to that farm to purchase the products. You can purchase it here at local, local farm ..."

Interestingly, a majority of respondents said there was no disadvantage of purchasing local food (35%): "Can't think of any," "No disadvantage" and "I think there a no disadvantages."

Limited food availability due to its seasonality was the second most frequently mentioned in regards to the disadvantage of purchasing local food (25%). Some sample quotes are as following: "There is no disadvantage except I am in a cold climate in the winter and there growing season is short," "You have to wait for the product to be in season before you can purchase it," "Dependent on growing season," "I have to cook for what is in season," and "Often cannot get food you want such as fruit which is only in season in the Midwest in the summer."

Paying inconsistent prices for the food or price

fluctuation due to its seasonality was the third most frequently mentioned disadvantage (21%). Some people (19%) also thought local food was less safe or they were skeptical about the local food regarding its quality standard: "...sometimes it is listed as "organic" but not sure it is truly organic..." "Maybe another disadvantage was it is not completely certified by USDA standards but I mean I didn't get sick. So it was good for me," "Sometimes the food is not grown or cultivated up to industrial standards. This may lead to a higher risk of contamination from bacteria and other germs," and "Regulations and standards may not be met always, therefore, compromising our health." Lastly, two respondents (1%) mentioned that they also wanted to support the world economy.

In addition to the disadvantages mentioned above, there were some other thoughts regarding the disadvantages of local food such as worse taste and false advertising of the food. Table 1 summarizes the results of five most frequently mentioned advantages and disadvantage of purchasing local food.

Normative Beliefs

People who own or work at local food businesses were the most frequently mentioned regarding the people who would approve of local food purchase (73%). These include local farmers' market, local grocery stores, local health food stores, local distributor for food supply, and local supermarket.

With regards to people who would approve of buying local food, the next frequent answer was local farmers (47%). Sample quotes are as follows: "I would think anyone who lives here and especially the local farmers," and "farmers that grow produce within a 50-100 mile radius."

Approximately 21% of the respondents also mentioned that family, including husband, wife, children, mother, and father, would approve of their local food purchase. A respondent said, "I guess my mom and dad are proud of me for buying local stuff." Local people who live in the same area, such as neighbors, and friends were also mentioned by multiple respondents, 16% and 11%, respectively. Besides the major responds stated above, government, environmentalists, chamber of commerce, vegetarians, older generations, doctors, health agencies, health advocates, and nutritionists were also mentioned by respondents as individuals or groups who would approve of local food purchase.

While people who own or work at local food businesses were the most frequently mentioned regarding the people who would approve of local food purchase (73%), 29% of respondents answered that large corporations, big box stores, and chain grocery stores, such as Wal-Mart, Target, Safeway, Giant Foods, Food Lion, and Wegmans, would disapprove of their local food purchase. At the same time, approximately 21% of respondents said there was no one who would disapprove of purchasing local food.

Table 1. Behavioral beliefs about purchasing local food (n=163)

Behavioral beliefs	n	%
Advantages		
Helps local economy	127	76.97
Fresher	101	61.21
Know where the food came from and how it was handled	68	41.21
Good for environment	54	32.73
Health benefits	51	30.91
Disadvantages		
None	57	34.55
Limited availability	42	25.45
Inconsistent prices	34	20.61
Inferior quality	32	19.39
Unable to support world economy	2	1.21

Table 2. Normative beliefs about purchasing local food (n=163)

Normative beliefs	n	%
Approval		
Local businesses	120	72.73
Local farmers	78	47.27
Family	34	20.61
Local people	27	16.36
Friends	18	10.91
Disapproval		
Chain/box stores	48	29.09
None	34	20.61
Out of state farmers	8	4.85
Large scale farmers	6	3.64
Transportation companies/food distributors	5	3.03

Out of state farmers (5%), large-scale farmers (4%), and transportation companies or food distributors (3%) were also brought up as individuals or a group who would disapprove of local food purchase. In addition to the responses listed above, the survey participants also mentioned politicians, processed food companies, fast food restaurants, foreign companies, global companies, younger generations, and low income people, as those who would discourage local food purchase. Table 2 summarizes the results of five most frequently mentioned individuals or groups who would approve and disapprove of purchasing local food.

Control Beliefs

The respondents perceived inconvenient store locations and hours were their biggest barrier to purchase local food (62%). This may imply that many people perceive local food is only available at farmers' markets and the markets are in inconvenient locations with limited hours: "The biggest factor that prevents me from buying local is that the stands either close early in the evening or are only open on certain days," "In addition, the farmer's market is often during the weekdays during work hours, so it is not possible to visit this market if you are working full time," "Not enough days for the local farmers

markets to open," "Having to travel too far with the price of gas," and "Accessibility! If I have to drive 30 minutes to pick up local produce that I could by at a store 5 minutes from my house would be prohibitive." "Limited place to purchase local food, such as farmers market... more big supermarket that supplies more outside food from other states or foreign country should carry local food."

Higher prices were the second most frequently mentioned factor as a barrier of purchasing local food (36%). Sample quotes are as follows: "Too expensive. Can't afford it!" "The price is too high or more than I would normally pay at Costco or another grocery store," and "not enough money for everything that I would like to buy."

Approximately 25% of people perceived that lack of availability and variety were the barriers of purchasing local food. Some examples of the answers are as follows: "Another factor is that the local food is often in a farmer's market where you have to wander around to find what you want, and it may not be available every time the farmer's market meets," "One negative would be that the quantity of food needed may not be available," "...lack of variety," and "Once again, the climate may preclude the growth of fresh food. Our weather is such that getting it to market may be difficult during the winter."

Table 3. Control beliefs about purchasing local food (n=163)

Control beliefs	n	%
Barriers		
Inconvenient store location and time	102	61.82
Higher prices	59	35.76
Lack of availability and variety	42	25.45
No barriers	21	12.73
No knowledge where to buy	12	7.27
Facilitators		
Convenient location	33	20.00
Availability of local food in regular grocery stores	21	12.73
Existence of farmers' markets/food stands	19	11.52
Lower prices	19	10.91
More availability and variety	10	6.06

While many people perceive there is no such a barrier to buy local food (13%), quite a few people (7%) did not know where to purchase local food: "I don't know of any place to buy local," and "Can find them and they are not advertising." Limited payment method was also a barrier of purchasing local food (6%): "Accept only cash" and "No EBT use ...".

On top of the barriers mentioned above, food safety issues, personal physical condition to drive to farmers' markets, cleanness of the stores, and quality of the food were some of perceived obstacles of buying local food.

Even though many people perceived that the hours and locations were major barriers of purchasing local food, those were not limitations to quite a few respondents (20%). That is, they thought the hours and locations were facilitators of their local food purchase: "Proximity to my home," "Close proximity to where I work or live," and "I live near two areas where local food is sold every weekend, I am able to walk to both locations."

Local grocery stores that carry local food (13%) and existences of farmers' markets or food stands in town (12%) was second and third frequently mentioned facilitators of local food purchase, respectively: "Local grocery markets carrying local foods; farmer markets; food stands." Several people men-

tioned that they would purchase local food more easily if regular grocery stores also carry local food.

Multiple respondents mentioned that lower prices (11%) and more availability and variety (6%) would be facilitators of purchasing local food. Other responses include delivery, online purchasing, and availability of public transportations. Table 3 shows the results of five most frequently mentioned barriers and facilitators of purchasing local food.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to get insight into the essential cognitive basis of local food purchase behavior using the TPB elicitation study method. This study discovered U.S. consumers' behavioral, normative, and control beliefs about purchasing local food by conducting an elicitation study with 163 respondents from 30 different states.

The most salient advantage was supporting local economy, followed by freshness, knowledge of where the food came from and how it was handled, environmental benefits, and health benefits. The results are not very different from the previous research. According to Chambers et al (2007), U.K consumers purchase local food mainly because of higher food quality, supporting local farmers, and convenience.

Furthermore, Roininen et al (2006) found that Finland consumers prefer local food due to its freshness, environmental friendly characteristics, and economic benefits to local area. Therefore, the study results from this study are in line with the previous findings, indicating U.S. consumers also perceived advantages of purchasing local food in the similar way. When marketers advertise local food, they should develop marketing strategies which emphasize those advantages so that consumers can develop positive attitudes about purchasing local food.

Interestingly, quite a few respondents mentioned there were no disadvantages of purchasing local food, indicating that many people generally have positive attitudes about purchasing local food. Disadvantages such as limited availability and price fluctuations were problems related to seasonality issues, and those are very natural considering the characteristics of local food. However, farmers and policy makers should think about the current quality issues and try to overcome them. Overall, regarding the top five salient views of behavioral beliefs were advantages, indicating that consumers generally had positive behavioral beliefs about purchasing local food.

Assessing to consumers' normative beliefs found that local businesses, local farmers, family, local people, and friends were the most frequently mentioned individuals or groups who would approve consumers' local food purchasing. In contrast, the participants also mentioned chain/ box stores, out of state farmers, large scale farmers, and transportation companies, and food distributors would disapprove their local food purchase. It is important to note that those specific groups of people could influence consumers' local food purchase.

The most salient barrier was inconvenient store location and time, followed by higher prices, limited availability and variety, and limited knowledge about where to buy local food. On the contrary, locations, availability in regular grocery stores, existence of farmers' markets/ food stands, lower prices, and availability and variety of food were facilitators of purchasing local food. Some findings were consistent with previous studies: Barriers of consuming local food were more expensive prices and inconvenience (Chambers et al 2007). As listed above, farmers and marketers should be aware that factors, such as loca-

tions, convenience, price, availability, and variety, were key ideas that form both barriers and facilitators depending on situations.

In conclusion, this study explored U.S consumers' beliefs regarding purchasing local food with a qualitative method. While some new factors that might be able to influence consumers' behavior about local food purchase were discovered, existing factors from previous research were confirmed as well. Moreover, the study results can also be used for development of indirect measures of the theory of planned behavior in the future.

This study could not be free from limitations. First, the small samples (n=163) cannot represent U.S. consumer population even though the data was obtained from 30 states. Next, because the data was obtained through online survey, it might have been difficult to derive deeper opinions of each survey participant. Future researcher may use different methods, such as individual interviews or focus group studies. Lastly, future studies may consider using demographic information as control variables to get more tailored results.

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미국 소비자들의 로컬 푸드 구매에 대한 내재된 신념에 관한 연구

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국문초록

본 연구의 목적은 Ajzen(1991)의 계획된 행동이론을 바탕으로 로컬 푸드를 구매와 관련한 기초적인 인지적 근거를 조사하는 것이다. 개방형 문항으로 이루어진 온라인 설문조사를 통해서 163명의 응답자로부터 자료를 수집하였으며, 수집된 로컬 푸드 구매와 관련한 소비자의 핵심적인 행동적 신념, 규범적 신념, 통제적 신념에 대한 자료를 분석하고 평가했다. 응답자들의 가장 핵심적인 행동적 신념은 지역경제 발전에 이바지함으로 나타났으며, 뒤를 이어 신선함, 식품의 원산지와 취급과정에 대한 지식, 환경혜택, 건강혜택으로 나타났다. 규범적 신념으로는 지역 사업가, 지역 농부, 가족, 지역민, 친구의 순으로 로컬 푸드 구매를 지지하는 것으로 나타났다. 반면, 로컬 푸드 구매와 관련한 장애 물로는 불편한 로컬푸드 상점의 위치와 영업시간, 높은 가격, 상품의 제한성과 다양성, 구매처에 대한 제한된 지식 등이 주로 거론되었다.

주제어: 로컬 푸드, 계획된 행동이론, 도출, 핵심적 신념