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Local, national and imported foods: a qualitative study

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Abstract

The UK government is currently attempting to encourage consumers to buy more locally produced food. It is hoped that this will provide economic, environmental and social benefits to local areas, leading to more sustainable patterns of consumption. This qualitative study looks at the views and behaviour of consumers towards local foods with a particular focus on the barriers that prevent greater uptake of local produce. In total, four focus groups (n=33) were conducted. Content analysis identified six relevant themes in relation to local, national and imported foods. These were cost, lifestyle, food quality, consumer ethnocentrism, choice and farmers. Overall, although participants reported buying few local products currently, there was widespread enthusiasm across socio-economic groups for local foods, with participants perceiving them as being of a higher quality than imported foods. They also generally endorsed the idea of supporting local farmers and their own national economy. The main barriers preventing participants from buying more local products were price and inconvenience. The results are discussed in relation to developing future strategies for encouraging people to buy more local food products.

Key Words: Local foods, qualitative, focus group, rural economy, food choice

Introduction

In the UK, much of the food that we buy is sold in supermarkets rather than through small local retailers, or outlets such as farmers markets. Although supermarkets are selling an increasing amount of local foods, the majority of their products continue to be nationally produced or imported (Jones, 2002). Indeed, local or regional food products currently account for a very small share of the food and drink market in the UK, with only 6% of all food sales produced regionally (Defra, 2003).

In recent years the UK Government has begun to promote direct sales at the local level in response to EU commitment to develop a ten-year plan for sustainable consumption (Policy Commission on Farming and Food, 2002). Defra (2005) believes that food consumed closer to its point of production has the potential to provide economic, environmental and social benefits in relation to sustainable consumption at the local level. Encouragingly, previous research has revealed that consumers are generally positive about locally produced foods. For example, consumers feel that by buying local produce they are purchasing products that are more authentic and higher quality (Lee, 2000; Boyle, 2003), as well as fresher (La Trobe, 2001), more nutritious, tasty and safe (Seyfang, 2004). Furthermore, a New Economics Foundation poll (2003) found that 52% of respondents with a preference wanted to purchase locally grown food, whilst another 45% would prefer their food to be grown in the UK. However, there is currently little information regarding the perceived and actual barriers that prevent consumers from buying more local foods. Therefore, the aim of this study is to investigate consumer perceptions and behaviour towards local, national and imported foods. In particular we intend to examine whether attitudes towards local foods vary with socio-economic grouping, as

consumer willingness to pay for value added goods might be restricted to those on higher income levels. Additionally, we will look at urban-rural location, as Weatherell et al (2003) reported that those living in rural areas were more aware and enthusiastic about local foods.

Method

As few previous studies have examined variations in consumer preferences between local, national and imported foods, a qualitative focus group approach was adopted here. Focus groups are particularly suited to understanding complex behaviours such as food choice because they encourage participants to query and explain themselves to each other (Morgan & Krueger, 1993). Thus, they will allow us to explore not only what consumers prefer, but also the reasons for their preferences, and any difficulties that they report in achieving their goals. The interactions during the focus groups will also provide valuable data on the extent of consensus and diversity of opinions among the participants.

Recruitment

Four focus groups were held at the University of Reading in June 2005, with a total of 33 participants. Two focus groups were conducted in the afternoon, and two in the evening to ensure people working during the day were represented. The local ethics committee for the School of Agriculture, Policy and Development granted ethical clearance for the study. Recruitment was subcontracted to a dedicated market research company based on the University of Reading campus and previously used by the authors. Recruitment was carried out via telephone from a household database belonging to the market research company and from local newspaper advertisements.

Therefore, respondents were residents living in Reading and its surrounding areas, which is located around 40 miles west of London. A recruitment questionnaire developed by the authors was used to screen respondents for demographic information, including gender, age, occupation, number of children, and whether they lived in an urban or rural area.

Each group was differentiated by socio-economic status (SES) based upon the Market Research Society's social grades, and was dependent upon the occupation of the chief income earner in the household. Two groups comprised participants of lower SES, and two comprised participants with higher SES. Participants in lower SES groups were those where the chief income earner's occupation could be classed as belonging to categories C2, D or E: participants in higher SES groups were those where the chief income earner's occupation could be classed as belonging to categories A, B or C1. There was an attempt to balance each group with regards to the other defining characteristics, as it was expected that socio-economic status would not be the only factor on which participants' attitudes would vary. A cash incentive of £25 was provided to each participant for his/her time and travel expenses. They were also provided with an information sheet on the research, and were asked to sign a declaration stating they were willing to take part in the focus group.

The recruitment procedure produced a gender imbalance across the groups with 22 women and 11 men. The group most significantly affected by this was Group 3, which contained only one male participant and eight female participants. However, given that females tend to carry out the household shopping this was not seen as problematic (Marshall & Anderson, 2000; Starrels, 1994). Fourteen of the 33

participants had children under the age of 16 and at least one participant in each group lived in a rural rather than urban area. Finally, there was representation from thirteen 50-70 year olds, as it seemed possible that their attitudes towards local foods might be different to younger participants.

Interview Protocol

There is no formal definition of the term ‘local foods’. They have been described in the academic and governmental literature as those foods that are grown, produced, and sold, within a single region. A general working definition, supported by this research, is thought to include products produced and sold within a 30-50 mile radius of a consumer’s home (Groves, 2005; La Trobe, 2001). This differs from locality foods, which are grown and produced in a certain area, but distributed beyond its boundaries (e.g., Bakewell tarts, Wensleydale cheese). This working definition was used to develop the interview protocol, and coincided with the same understanding of the term given by the majority of participants.

A semi-structured interview protocol was developed based primarily on a review of the existing literature and discussions between the authors. Additional input was provided by a pilot test (n=6) which ensured that the questions were clear and understandable to participants. The protocol was designed to explore participants’ attitudes to locally produced food products, their views on the attitudes of other people, and the extent to which they felt that they had control over what they bought. The protocol began by establishing a shared understanding of local, national and imported foods within each group. The protocol then moved on to a range of open-

ended questions to be addressed during the course of each interview concerning attitudes towards local, national and imported food products, as well as questions regarding the views of friends, family and society in general towards buying local foods. Questions that aimed to identify any barriers to buying more local foods were also included, as was a question on cost.

Procedure

Each group was moderated by the same interviewer to ensure consistency in interviewing style. Additional assistance was provided by a note taker, to ensure that participants could be identified during transcription. Each group lasted for approximately 90 minutes, and was tape-recorded and later transcribed. The aim of the project was explained to the participants, and assurances of anonymity and confidentiality were given. Brief introductions were made by each of the participants and also the moderator. The focus group protocol was comprehensive, but fairly broad in scope. This allowed participants to discuss the areas they felt most strongly about in the greatest depth. As a useful point of reference, the moderator noted participants' definitions of each food type on a large sheet of paper to help guide the discussion.

Data Analysis

The transcripts were analysed using thematic content analysis. The first author and a research assistant independently coded the data. This analysis was aided by the use of the N6 (formerly NUD*IST; QSR International, 2005) software package. One of the main advantages of using computer packages when carrying out qualitative data analysis is that text searches can be easily carried out. Related themes and categories

can be merged, and overlap between themes can be readily identified. For this study, the unit of analysis was a paragraph, and a paragraph could belong to more than one coded theme. With the help of N6, key words were identified that represented recurring themes. Results from key word searches allowed for the identification of paragraphs that could be coded around these themes. Once these paragraphs were identified, they could be easily contextualised using N6's 'spread coding' and 'overlap' functions. 'Spread coding' is used after key word searches have taken place. It allows the paragraph surrounding a relevant word to also be coded to a particular theme. This allows researchers to identify the particular context in which a theme was discussed, rather than merely identifying the number of times a particular word was used in the discussion. 'Overlap' aids the identification of relevant paragraphs where two or more themes are discussed in the same context, for example, local foods and price.

Results

Six key themes were present in each of the four groups. These were cost, lifestyle, food quality, consumer ethnocentrism, choice and farmers. There were no themes that emerged for any one socio-economic group alone.

At the beginning of each interview, participants were encouraged to think of geographical definitions. This was an important 'ice breaking' technique, and also ensured that participants understood what was meant by each term. However, the exercise also served to allow participants to define the parameters of the discussion themselves, rather than being influenced by the moderator.

Overall it was agreed that local foods were generally those produced, and sold, in a local area up to a maximum 20-50 mile radius from a participant's home. National products were defined as foods produced within the UK, including Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Imported foods were defined as those produced abroad. There was some reference to locality foods – those foods that are considered typical to a certain region or area within a UK context. These included Bakewell tarts, Cornish pasties, and Yorkshire pudding; however, participants acknowledged that these foods need not be produced locally, and therefore, did not discuss them at length within the groups. Finally, it is important to note that for this sample at least, the proportion of local foods purchased on a regular basis was very low (generally less than 1 product per month). Occasional local food purchases included eggs, butter and fruit.

Cost

One of the most salient themes was price. Some respondents believed that local foods were cheaper than national foods or imported foods.

...if you do manage to find these local places, you can buy more than you can get at supermarkets at a relatively good price. [Male, low SES, children, urban, 48]

However, in general local foods were viewed as being more expensive than national or imported foods.

I think local foods can be quite expensive. We'll go to a farmers' market and things like that, but that isn't cheap there. [Female, low SES, no children, urban, 67]

The local farm markets seem to be a lot dearer than if you were to go to the supermarket and buy the stuff. [Male, high SES, children, urban, 37]

I think imported on the whole [imported] are probably cheaper, nationally in between, I think locally is expensive. But I've never compared them. [Female, high SES, no children, urban, 59]

National foods were generally equated with those products sold in the supermarkets, and were, therefore, generally thought to be cheaper. The same was true of imported products. The previous quotation suggests that attitudes towards the price of food may not always be based upon experience, but rather perceptions of food prices.

It was generally accepted that farmers might have to charge higher prices if they were unable to grow, and sell, as much produce than if they sold their produce on a national scale.

Unexpectedly there were no major differences in how participants in low and high socio-economic groups viewed local foods, even with regards to price. For participants in higher SES groups, price still tended to be the deciding factor when making purchasing decisions regarding food. Male participants tended to stress the role of economies of scale in their discussions, as did participants older than 30 years

old. Women were more likely to describe the cost of food in terms of their own shopping experiences. Participants living in more rural areas were less likely to talk about the cost of food than those living in urban areas; however, they still agreed that local foods were more expensive.

Lifestyle

Lifestyle emerged as a theme through aggregating a number of related themes – most notably time and convenience. Many participants felt that although it would be an enjoyable and worthy experience to shop for local foods, they could not do this on a routine basis due to lack of time and opportunity.

I shop in the supermarket because it's convenient, but I do try to go to the market in town [Female, low SES, children, urban, 53]

Supermarkets were seen as beneficial in that they allowed people with limited time to shop quickly. Also participants in the 31-49 age group discussed the high quality standards that were associated with supermarkets as being a positive. However, whereas female participants emphasised the choice and convenience that supermarkets provided, some male participants expressed concerns over the perceived power of supermarkets. Indeed, all groups were concerned that supermarkets were partially responsible for driving smaller retailers out of business.

...you're going into any big supermarket, and they're just forcing everybody out. It's a shame. [Female, low SES, children, urban, 35]

Interestingly, there were a number of references to the past when local foods were more accessible and shopping was seen as more of a leisure activity.

It's a different lifestyle these days isn't it from what it used to be, you used to have the time to go and do the local shopping as such, but now... [Male, low SES, no children, urban, 66]

When I was a kid... I would have fresh bread, and I always used to go to a butcher, you know, a man who was cutting my steaks or whatever, and here you don't have that, everybody's on pre-packed and the butcher, the fresh butcher they have in the supermarket is just so limited [Female, high SES, children 31]

Unsurprisingly, these opinions were most prevalent in older participants. Overall, issues of convenience, tended to be raised more often by female participants. They discussed the problem of shopping for a large household and a lack of time, hence being unlikely to buy local foods directly from a farm or market. Participants living in both urban and rural areas felt that it was inconvenient to buy local foods on a regular basis.

Food Quality

Local foods were judged to be of a higher quality, particularly in terms of freshness as the food had travelled less distance.

...it's imported, so it's not as fresh as local or national, so it just depends what the food is really. [Female, low SES, children, urban, 53]

Local should mean freshness. [Female, low SES, no children, urban, 67]

It was also generally believed that local foods were superior in terms of taste.

Improved taste was linked with seasonality and was particularly important in relation to fruit. Products discussed in relation to seasonality included strawberries, plums and apples.

I think it's nice, and I have to say that definitely if you're looking at say strawberries, strawberries that are grown at home, you know, within June, have a totally different taste than something that you would buy from abroad [Female, low SES, children, urban, 38]

Both male and female participants discussed a preference for local foods that were in season. Women were more likely to talk about local foods being both tastier and fresher. All age groups felt that local foods were tastier and fresher, as did both urban and rural participants. Collectively, these findings were consistent with previous findings (La Trobe, 2001; Lee 2000; Boyle, 2003).

Finally, during the discussions on local foods, organic foods were often mentioned.

However, most participants seemed to draw a clear distinction between the two, despite the general consensus that organic and local foods shared some characteristics in common (e.g., food quality, safety and price).

Choice

Although preferring a number of attributes of local foods, participants still wanted to have choice when they shopped. For example, whilst British strawberries tasted best (available from May-July), there was also agreement that having the choice to eat strawberries out of season (and therefore imported) was important too.

...there'll be other people that I know who'll say if I want to make strawberry jam, I want to make it in October/November [Female, low SES, children, rural, 38]

Choice and imported foods was also important in terms of those foods that could not be obtained locally or nationally, such as different varieties of fruit.

We wouldn't have bananas for starters if we didn't import veg. [Male, high SES, no children, urban, 23]

It's just nice to have the choice, isn't it? [Female, low SES, children, urban, 53]

It was clear from these discussions that all participants valued the variety and year round choice that imported foods provided.

Consumer Ethnocentrism

The enthusiasm for supporting British products generally was even greater than the willingness to buy local produce. This not only meant that participants wanted to buy

more British products, but also that there were some countries whose products they wished to avoid.

If we don't buy British, we're putting our own people out of work. [Male, low SES, no children, urban, 66]

If I had a choice of two products that I knew one came from Britain and one came from another country, I'd buy British...because you feel that you're putting your own farmers out of business if you buy from another country
[Female, low SES, children, urban, 38]

There were also countries such as France from which participants would not buy food. However, objections to French food were based upon political and cultural reasons rather than a dislike of the taste, or concerns over the quality of produce. Political issues, such as the banning of British beef during the BSE crisis, and the refusal of the French government to reform the Common Agricultural Policy, appeared to lie behind participants' resentment towards French products.

I'm totally against the French anyway; I will not buy anything French whatsoever. I hate the French, absolutely hate them. [Male, low SES, no children, urban, 66]

I think that at the moment in this country we'd rather support the farmers in Africa than the French, because the French...they might want to take our rebate back... [Male, low SES, children, urban, 48]

Female participants were enthusiastic about British food in general, and preferred to buy this when possible; however, male participants tended to be more aggressive towards other countries (most notably France) in relation to country of origin. They believed that buying British would help the economy too. Younger participants discussed food origin in terms of helping poorer countries and fair trade products. Older participants were more enthusiastic about British foods and more negative towards those from abroad. There appeared to be no marked differences between urban and rural participants' views on country of origin.

Farmers

The final theme to emerge from the focus groups was the need to support farmers in the local area. A number of participants made reference to this, and when possible, tried to purchase local foods.

...you feel that you're putting your own farmers out of business if you buy from another country. [Female, low SES, children, urban, 38]

Interestingly though, there was also a degree of resentment towards farmers, with the implication that they were already a wealthy group in society.

They're dead crafty these farmers I tell you. [Male, low SES, no children, urban, 52].

You never see a poor farmer. They know every fiddle going to get money out of the Government, they really do. [Male, low SES, no children, urban, 66].

Views about supporting local farmers, and resentment towards them, were expressed almost exclusively by participants' in the lower SES groups – the only category where such a clear difference emerged. Negative views towards farmers were also only expressed by male participants. These negative views were also more likely to be held by participants over the age of 50. Participants aged between 31-49 expressed the most positive attitudes towards local farmers, believing it was good to support them when possible.

Discussion

Across four focus groups, there was a preference for purchasing local or national foods compared to imported alternatives. There was also a perception that local foods were fresher and tastier than other foods. Despite this, the focus groups identified important barriers to purchasing local foods. These included price and inconvenient lifestyles. In addition, the importance to participants of the choice provided by imported products was also identified. Overall, national foods were viewed as being of a higher quality than imported foods, and cheaper than local foods, and were therefore, most often purchased by consumers. Surprisingly, there were no major differences between high versus low SES participants or between those living in urban versus rural dwellings in terms of the way in which local foods were discussed.

Policy Implications

The Policy Commission on Food and Farming (2002) suggested that promoting local foods may be one way to improve the sustainability of the UK food chain in terms of economic, environmental and social gains. Moreover, the report expected that consumers would be willing to pay more for products they perceived to have some degree of added value. Although participants in the current study were generally enthusiastic about local foods, there were a number of reported barriers, which meant that consumers were unlikely (e.g., price, inconvenience, time) to increase the amount of local food that they purchased.

Overall, the results of the focus groups suggest that there is support for local foods from consumers, but not as added value products as envisaged by the Policy Commission. Though consumers recognise that there are potential economic and social benefits in changing their purchasing behaviour, these benefits do not currently overcome the barriers they have to face in order to achieve these changes.

Therefore, in the absence of more effective marketing of local produce, at a policy level it may be more realistic to promote national products rather than local products per se. Participants identified strongly with these products and were enthusiastic about the quality of British products and supporting the British economy. There were fewer perceived barriers to buying national foods, with these products freely available in supermarkets.

Marketing implications

Given the strong preference reported by participants for products produced within the UK, a potentially successful marketing strategy could be to appeal to a sense of local pride. Locally produced products could be marketed on the basis of their distinctiveness from other areas. Stressing the potential benefits to the local economy may also be a successful approach. However, as some participants felt a degree of animosity towards farmers, future initiatives would be advised to emphasise the benefits of buying local produce for the local community as a whole rather than just the local farmer (e.g., local markets versus farmers markets).

These marketing strategies will lack major impact if they fail to take into account the barriers that exist in relation to the purchase of local foods, most specifically time and cost. Until local producers, and government, can address these difficulties, perhaps through more regular and better publicised events, or even in conjunction with major supermarket chains, local foods will continue to suffer by comparison. A surprising finding was that participants in the current study were generally unaware that most supermarkets supply at least some local food products. For example, Tesco claim to have 3000 local food lines in their stores, and Somerfield sells over 2000 locally produced foods from small suppliers (CPRE, 2002). Thus, one short to medium term solution may be to petition supermarkets to offer better placement and marketing of local products in relation to national and imported products to raise their profile in consumers' minds.

Limitations and future research

While the merits of using focus groups were discussed in a previous section, a potential limitation of this methodology is that one or two participants can dominate

discussions. Furthermore, although considerable care was taken to encourage all focus group members to contribute in the current study, a related problem is that more reticent individuals may be reluctant to express dissent. Notwithstanding this, the focus groups were successful in terms of identifying many of the complex issues involved in making food choices for local, national and imported products. Now that the issues that consumers consider important have been determined, quantitative work needs to be done with a larger, representative sample so that the results can be generalised to a wider population.

Finally, while the absence of an effect of socio-economic status on attitudes towards local produce may reflect an unexpectedly high level of agreement across these different groupings it would be prudent to replicate this study with a sample drawn from a different geographical location.

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