

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Engaging Consumers' Sense of Place through Food Citizenship

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Abstract

Participating in urban gardening and community supported agriculture, eating locally-grown food and shopping at alternative food outlets (e.g., local farmers' markets, food cooperatives, or produce stands) are all activities that constitute food citizenship. As a set of behaviors, food citizenship represents consumers' psychological commitment to public health and human wellbeing. However, there is a gap between consumers' attitudes about food citizenship and their actual engagement in related behaviors, which is a commonly noted issue in consumer psychology.

In this research, we explore what motivates consumers to engage in food citizenship and how such behaviors help consumers to psychologically reconnect with agriculture and food production by increasing their sense of place. Our qualitative and quantitative findings indicate that consumers engage in food citizenship to learn more about their food systems. Consistent with prior research, we find that food citizenship increases consumers' sense of place. However, consumers' sense of place is not only psychological in nature but also shaped by their everyday physical and online experiences. In other words, both the social and environmental elements of food citizenship can enhance or diminish consumers' sense of place.

Our findings suggest that the disconnection consumers feel from agriculture and food production can be repaired. Local food systems can help consumers to establish a sense of place by providing them with opportunities for engaging in food citizenship and rekindling a connection to agriculture. Food citizenship also enables consumers to experience community and seasonality through a symbiotic relationship with local agricultural production rather than as merely its end users. In this way, the gap between consumers' food citizenship attitudes and behaviors can be reduced.

Keywords: Food Citizenship, Consumers' Sense of Place, Consumer Psychology

1. Introduction

With technological advancements and a cultural shift towards industrial food sourcing, consumers have increasingly become removed from agriculture and food production (Fischler 1988; Trubeck and Bowen 2008; Wilk 1999; Wilkins 2005). O’Kane (2012), for example, explains that consumers often perceive multinational corporations rather than farmers to be the origin of their foods, which has contributed to consumers’ widespread physical and affective disconnection from agriculture. Whereas consumers were once integrally tied to food systems, their confusion today about food seasonality, preparation, production, and traditions reflects a general lack of knowledge about what they eat (Fischler 1988; Wilkins 2005).

Although the disavowal of nature and routinization of social life may be regarded as the natural progression of an evolving postindustrial society, consumers’ disengagement with agriculture and food production is a cause for concern. Food systems are intricately tied to human diet and health (Drewnowski and Darmon 2005; Story et al. 2008), as well as comprise elements of our social identity and sense of place (Bessière 1998; Delind 2006; Fischler 1988; Lockie 2000). Therefore, low levels of consumer engagement with agriculture and food production may have potentially detrimental implications for human wellbeing (Devine-Wright and Clayton, 2010).

There is evidence, however, that consumers may be actively seeking ways to reestablish their lost connection to agriculture and food production by supporting more local and sustainable food systems. For example, the number of farmers’ markets in the United States increased 17% between 2010 and 2011 (USDA 2012). Similarly, consumers are participating in urban gardening and community supported agriculture, eating

locally-grown food and shopping at alternative food outlets (e.g., local farmers’ markets, food cooperatives, or produce stands) (Levkoe 2011; Stagl 2002; Zepeda and Li 2006). All these activities constitute food citizenship (Koc and Dahlberg 1999; Levkoe 2011; Stagl 2002; Wilkins 2005) and encourage collaboration between food producers and consumers (Cone and Myhre 2000; Cox et al. 2008; Hinrichs 2000; Kirby, 2003; Sharp et al. 2002; Wells and Gradwell 2001).

Food citizenship has been defined as “the practice of engaging in food-related behaviors that support rather than threaten the development of a democratic, socially and economically just and environmentally sustainable food system” (Wilkins 2005: 271). As a set of behaviors, it represents consumers’ psychological commitment to public health and human wellbeing (O’Kane 2016). However, there is a gap between consumers’ attitudes about food citizenship and their actual engagement in related behaviors (Griffin & Sobal 2013), which is a commonly noted issue in consumer psychology (Monds et al. 2016). In this research, we explore what motivates consumers to engage in food citizenship and how such behaviors help consumers to psychologically reconnect with agriculture and food production. We now develop specific hypotheses about the antecedents and consequences of food citizenship, followed by a description of our qualitative and quantitative methodology and results. We conclude by discussing the significance of our findings.

2. Food Citizenship and Information-Seeking

Understanding what motivates people to engage in food citizenship is important for encouraging this consumer behavior and reconnecting consumers to agriculture and food production. Seyfang (2006) determined that whereas 65% of the respondents in her

study joined an organic food cooperative to reconnect with their agricultural community, more than 70% sought environmental protection or better-tasting food. Yet, when testing the predictors of local food purchases, Zepeda and Li (2006) found that environmental and health attitudes were not significantly related to localism, but food or shopping behaviors were (i.e. gardening, cooking enjoyment, shopping for health foods, etc.). Therefore, factors beyond the perceived nutritional and social value of food may motivate consumers to engage in food citizenship.

Consumers may begin participating in food citizenship activities to address the general question of where their food comes from, how it is manufactured and the impact of their food choices on others (O’Kane 2012; Seyfang 2006; Stagl 2002). When a person lacks knowledge, they engage in information-seeking – the process of searching, acquiring, and using information to accomplish a particular goal or answer a question (Kerstetter and Cho, 2004; Kuhlthau 1991; Vakkari 1999). However, few empirical studies demonstrate whether and how information-seeking motivates consumers’ food citizenship activities.

Zepeda and Deal’s (2009) study is a notable exception. The authors explored how consumers’ values, beliefs and norms related to organic food shopping, and they discerned that organic food shoppers and “culinary activists” collected food information from the Internet, books and cookbooks more frequently than conventional shoppers (Zepeda and Deal 2009). In fact, conventional shoppers who knew less about organic foods infrequently sought information about food and food issues; rather, they preferred to consult convenient sources like friends who could reinforce their own social norms (Zepeda and Deal 2009). Oates et al. (2008) also illustrated that levels of information-seeking increased with consumer involvement and experience.

Novices in their study depended on energy ratings and brand reputations as information sources whereas those with more experience eschewed brands altogether, predominantly acquiring information from green publications and public interest groups (Oates et al. 2008). Both studies suggest that prior knowledge is a key determinant of information-seeking amongst food consumers, which may lead to prosocial or proenvironmental behaviors such as food citizenship (Zepeda and Deal 2009) or voluntary simplicity (Oates et al. 2008).

Information-seeking should lead to increased food citizenship regardless of whether found information is negatively or positively valenced. Consumers have been shown to focus on more negative than positive nutrition information found on food labels (Balasubramanian and Cole 2002; Russo et al. 1986). They may also seek information as a result of negative attributes related to local and global food sustainability, such as food insecurity, inequity, health or environmental problems (O’Kane 2012; Seyfang 2006). Information searches drawn from these types of social and health concerns should increase consumers’ willingness to be a food citizen by offering them an opportunity to reduce their disaffection with industrial food systems. Conversely, consumers presented with positive nutrition and health information have been shown to display positive attitudes towards food while perceived enhancements in taste or nutrition have been shown to positively influence their willingness to try novel foods (Kozup et al. 2003; Moorman 1990; Pelchat and Pliner 1995). Consumers seek information on freshness, taste and nutrition, especially when they shop at alternative food markets (Lekvøe, 2011; Stagl, 2002); therefore, attributing positive benefits to local and sustainable food consumption should increase their desire to be a food citizen. Thus, information-seeking can be expected to increase consumers’ food citizenship regardless of whether they acquire negative

or positive information about food systems. As such, we hypothesize that:

H1: Information-seeking is positively related to food citizenship.

3. Information-Seeking and Prior Knowledge

Prior knowledge that consumers have about food systems may affect whether they will engage in food citizenship to gain new information. In this context, consumers' prior knowledge consists of their familiarity with agriculture and food production as well as their past food citizenship activity (Alba and Hutchinson 1987; Brucks 1985; Kerstetter and Cho 2004). Given a lack of familiarity with food systems (Wilkins 2005), consumers may be motivated to conduct an external search for more information on the source of their food (Bettman 1979; Howard 2006; Peterson and Merino 2003; Kerstetter and Cho 2004). Tourism research also suggests that consumers past experiences increase their information searching (Milman and Pizam 1995; Kerstetter and Cho 2004). As such, consumers who have previously engaged in food citizenship may be more inclined to search for additional opportunities (Brucks 1985). As such, we hypothesize that:

H2a: Familiarity is negatively related to information-seeking.

H2b: Past experience is positively related to information-seeking.

4. Food Citizenship and Sense of Place

Information that consumers gain through food citizenship may impact their sense of place. A sense of place can be defined as "a collection of symbolic meanings, attachment and satisfaction with a spatial setting held by an individual or group" (Stedman 2002). Food citizenship involving alternative food outlets (e.g., local farmers' markets, food

cooperatives, or produce stands) may awaken the sensorial, affective and expressive relationships between the body, food, and place (Delind 2006). Alternative food outlets can also be nexuses of heightened sociality and the emplacement of food systems (Feagan 2007). The blend of these social and environmental elements associated with food citizenship give rise to feelings and meanings associated with having a sense of place (Schroeder 2007).

Social relationships and a sense of community are especially vital to sustaining a sense of place (Brandenburg and Carroll 1995; Hay 1998; Mazumdar et al 2000; Qian et al. 2011; Pretty et al. 2003) because the latter construct is an amalgamation of personally and communally salient experiences (Auburn and Barnes 2006; Greider and Garkovich 1994; Jorgensen and Stedman 2001). When consumers shop for and eat foods that are grown in familiar or meaningful locales, shared meanings and values may be transmitted and produced intersubjectively, which evokes a sense of place (Brandenburg and Carroll 1995). This is especially relevant when considering that personal attachments to places are often associated with residing in a locale over an extended time. Food citizenship adopted as part of a lifestyle may, therefore, also aide in enhancing a sense of place when consumers relocate. Eating and shopping for familiar food may not only conjure memories of agricultural place-worlds (e.g. Mazumdar et al. 2000) but also may validate a consumer decision to seek food citizenship activities in a new locale. As such, we hypothesize that:

H3: Food citizenship is positively related to sense of place.

5. Methodology

We employed a multi-method research design to test our hypotheses. The first stage of our study involved an inductive exploration into consumers' attitudes and

behaviors related to agriculture and food production, as well as their desired options for food citizenship. This was accomplished via semi-structured focus groups and one-on-one in-depth interviews with consumers. Information gleaned from this qualitative research guided the second stage of our study, which employed a quantitative survey to assess the antecedents and consequences of food citizenship.

5.1 Qualitative Stage

Recruitment for focus groups and in-depth interviews occurred simultaneously via intercept over four-hour time spans outside both a national chain grocery store and a local farmers' market in Tucson, Arizona. These two sites were selected to recruit respondents with potentially different socio-demographic profiles and levels of current engagement with agriculture and food production. Only respondents who reported themselves as being the head of their households were included in our study. They were allowed to choose whether they wanted to participate in a focus group or in-depth interview. All focus groups and interviews were recorded and each respondent received a \$20 gift card as compensation for their participation.

Four one-hour focus groups consisting of 8-12 respondents each ($n=32$; 21 females, 11 males, age range of 18-65 years) were conducted in the fall of 2009 at the University of Arizona campus. All focus groups were run by one of the authors who was an experienced moderator. The focus groups followed a semi-structured schedule with respondents first being queried about their food sourcing and consumption behaviors and attitudes (i.e., farmers' market, organic produce). After subsequent grounding and discussion, respondents were presented with three written concept statements about food citizenship options sponsored by the Arizona Farm Bureau, which a grassroots agricultural organization

specific to the state of Arizona. The concept statements differed in terms of the presented types of interactions with food systems as a means of enhancing consumers' sense of place. The first concept included a gourmet dining emphasis with instruction from a local chef while a second concept offered workshops on growing food with instruction from local farmers. The third concept concentrated on engagement through interactive media, such as receiving email newsletters about seasonality and attending local food tastings. Each respondent provided written feedback on the three concepts in addition to discussing their thoughts and opinions about each one in their focus group.

One-on-one interviews were also conducted at the University of Arizona in the spring of 2010 with an additional ten respondents (9 female, 1 male, age range of 18-65 years) who did not participate in the focus groups but were recruited concurrently. Each interview lasted approximately one hour and was facilitated by one of the two authors who did not moderate the focus groups. Prior to conducting the interviews, the authors trained with each other using the same semi-structured interview guide to ensure consistency in probing for responses and reduce potential researcher bias.

The authors compared field notes and analyzed the content of all interview and focus groups recordings and materials. This was accomplished during meeting sessions whereby each author identified and coded recurring themes, then combined efforts and undertook collaborative coding to reconfirm and finalize their findings. The themes and wording derived from this iterative process of analyzing qualitative focus group and interview data were used in the next quantitative stage of the study to modify the concept statements about food citizenship options sponsored by the Arizona Farm Bureau, as well as construct survey measures

of the antecedents and consequences of food citizenship.

5.2 Quantitative Stage

Guided by our qualitative findings, we conducted an online quantitative survey to test our hypotheses. For this survey, a national data analysis firm recruited head of households from Arizona ($n=1501$; 67% female; average income of \$50,350; 56% were under 55 years; 30% had children). Each participant was awarded Internet shopping points for completing the survey.

The survey began with questions measuring respondents' prior knowledge. These included measures of familiarity and past experiences that we constructed using themes and wording from our qualitative findings. Familiarity (Cronbach's $\alpha=.84$) measured consumers' knowledge about food systems and consisted of two items: "I am knowledgeable about where my food comes from" and "I am knowledgeable about how my food is made." Past experience (Cronbach's $\alpha=.76$) measured consumers' prior engagement in food citizenship and was assessed using a three-item measure that recorded frequency of shopping at farmers' markets, as well as for locally-grown and organic foods. All items were measured using a Likert scale (1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree). We also included a control for consumers' ascribed importance to obtaining information about their food. Importance (Cronbach's $\alpha=.91$) was measured using two items ("Learning about where food comes from is important to me" and "Learning about where food is made is important to me.")

Next, respondents read a brief description of the Arizona Farm Bureau to contextualize the modified concept statements about food citizenship options sponsored by the organization, which were subsequently presented to them in a counterbalanced order along with questions measuring their related

information-seeking, engagement in food citizenship and felt sense of place using a Likert scale (1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree). Given our qualitative findings, we measured Information-Seeking (Cronbach's $\alpha=.75$) using two reverse-coded items about online search tools and cooking videos ("I could not see myself using the online search tool for local farm ingredients" and "I could not see myself watching the cooking videos described above"). We measured Sense of Place (Cronbach's $\alpha=.71$) using two items related to community and seasonality ("The service offering described above will make me feel like part of a community" and "The service offering described above will connect me to foods that are in season"). Finally, our measures for Food Citizenship (Cronbach's $\alpha=.80$) all gauged respondents' engagement in the presented concept options for food citizenship activities (e.g., "I would bring my family to a monthly cookout or tasting to learn about local foods" and "At the monthly cookout or tasting, I would want to talk to farmers about local foods"). We also collected information about respondents' attitudes about membership organizations, shopping behaviors, demographics, personality (Big 5 measured by Costa and McCrae, 1992), and environmental concern (New Environmental Paradigm scale by Dunlap et al., 2000).

6. Results

6.1 Qualitative Data

As a whole, our qualitative data indicate that consumers are largely removed from agriculture and food production and are experiencing a decreased sense of place with respect to food systems. Sarah – a working mom in her 30s – recounts how she became aware of this disconnection when reading a magazine article about the meat processing industry:

"I was getting kinda grossed out. In the past, when I'd eat a hamburger. I would imagine

okay, you know, 'one cow.' I'm eating one cow. And then I read somewhere... there's actually like a hundred cows in this little burger and they could be from anywhere in the world. You could have like 'Brazilian' cow. It could have, whatever, a cow from everywhere in one burger! And it just made me uncomfortable."

Sarah's vivid description highlights how consumers' sense of place can be altered by information about industrial food production. Gaining such knowledge can propel consumers to engage in food citizenship. Sarah now attends farmers' markets:

"We go (to farmers' markets) a bit. But, we tend not to buy very much. It's more for the experience. Like we love looking at the vegetables, but then there's that whole 'dirt' element. It's not so convenient to, then, use. But things like tomatoes, or peppers, we'll definitely buy... It's festive. You get a sense of what's around."

Indeed, consumers have a genuine desire to become more involved with agriculture and food production. Going to farmers' markets was the most common form of food citizenship among our study respondents. Farmers' markets provide consumers with convenient access to local food and knowledge about agriculture without necessitating that they travel afar, thereby enhancing their sense of place through experienced community and seasonality. Feeling connected to a place, regardless of the proximal distance, was important to many of our study respondents. Patty – a head of household in her 40s – recalls her prior engagement with a farmers' market.

"We used to live out in Vail and there's a big farmers' market. It's out on, umm, Old Spanish Trail. And I used to try to shop there every week when I was there. Now that we're back in town, it's a little bit harder...I liked the fact that (the farmers' market) was a community gathering place, too. You'd go

there and you'd see your neighbors, a chance to talk to people, kinda like a grocery store does. But, you're talking directly with the vendors. Okay, what's the freshest? What just came in? They did have some locally, like pre-made food, like people who would make their own tamales and sell them there. But, I know that they were made in the last 24 hours. Not 14 days ago, by someone in New Jersey. That's why (the farmers' market) was important to me."

Given limited time and a myriad of other constraints, study respondents emphasized that food citizenship must fit into their everyday lives. Although consumers recognize that they lack information about their food systems and express interest in directly connecting with food producers and agricultural communities (e.g., via community-supported agriculture, farmers' markets, and local farms), they realize that their lifestyle and preferences may not accommodate such activities. Eleanor – an empty nester in her 50s – reported that produce selection was a major factor in her decision not to participate in community-supported agriculture (CSAs), which she learned about through a television show:

"So, I've seen on some of the cooking shows... They had a farm that was close by, an organic farm. And you could sign up for weekly delivery of a box of whatever was being harvested. But you had no idea of what you're getting? I'm not so sure I want that! I don't eat fruit, so that's one thing. It's just (not) me."

To that end, our three concept statements about food citizenship options sponsored by the Arizona Farm Bureau were favorably received by study respondents. Many expressed a willingness to participate in the described activities for their own benefit as well as that of the community. The concepts reminded Helen – a working mom in her 30s – of her previous experiences searching for

and cooking with local ingredients from Arizona:

“Using local ingredients. That's nice because there's a lot of things that we have (in Arizona). But, we may not be aware of them... I've experimented, for instance, with things like prickly pear (cactus). I've experimented with some of it, but it would be nice to know a little bit more... [Also] growing up on a farm community, I know it's important for the farmers to be able to sell their products. So, to me, that's important to try to support the other people around in the community. And some of it may be things I can't get somewhere else. It may be something that's grown locally that's a specialty item. And it may be better in certain areas, like pecans. They're better in certain areas than they are in others. So, you might want to go and get them in [southern Arizona] rather than over, you know, at some other places.”

Her experiences convey that a sense of place may be aroused through an amalgamation of memories, emotions and meanings associated with food and agriculture. Foremost, Helen recalled specialty foods that are indigenous to the desert Southwest and very iconic of Southern Arizona. She divulged her enjoyment of local agriculture and the reestablishment of place through the uniqueness of these local foods that she “can't get somewhere else.” Secondly, Helen's use of local ingredients also reified her support for the Arizona farming community that she grew up in.

Overall, our qualitative findings indicate that consumers are largely removed from agriculture and food production and are also experiencing a decreased sense of place with respect to food systems. Consistent with prior research (Brandenberg and Carroll 1995; Delind 2006; Feagan 2007), we also

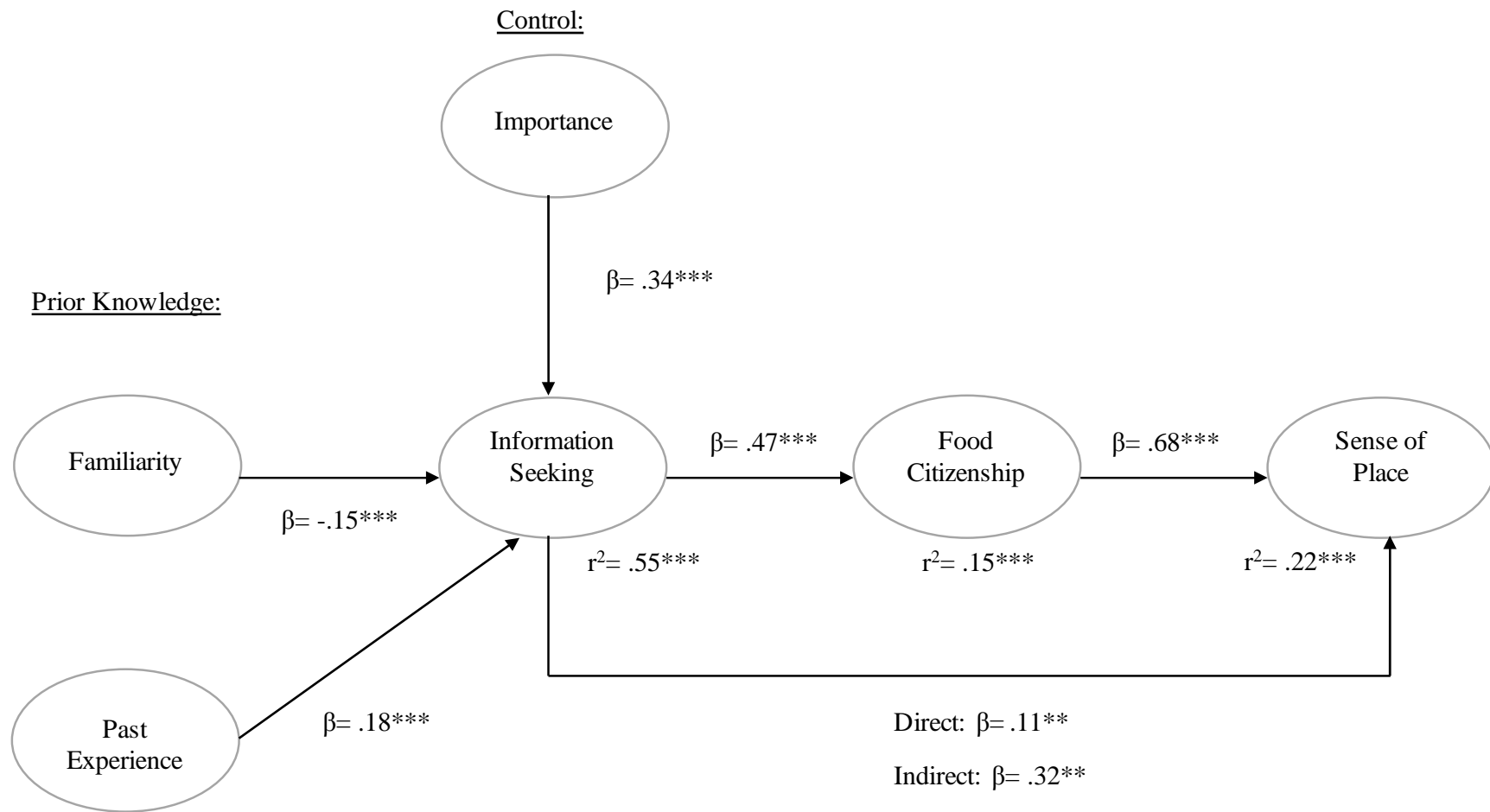
find that consumers' food citizenship behaviors can increase their sense of place. However, our study respondents' sense of place is not only psychological in nature but also shaped by everyday physical experiences. In other words, both the social and environmental elements of food citizenship can enhance or diminish consumers' sense of place.

6.2 Quantitative Data

Prior to running any statistical analyses at the completion of our online survey, collected quantitative data were analyzed for percentages and patterns of missingness. As the data set contained less than 2% of missing values from any survey item, imputation was deemed unnecessary for any missing values. In addition, the values that were missing were determined to be missing completely at random.

Our hypotheses were tested using structural equation modeling and MPlus 6.10 software. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted to determine whether the proposed latent structures fit the data well (Curran et al. 1996). In an effort to resolve model underidentification, traditional scale setting techniques were conducted in accordance with the recommendations of Little et al. (2006). The chi-square value was significant ($\chi^2(51) = 234.21$, but the fit statistics (RMSEA = .049, TLI = .978, CFI = .967) indicated a relatively good model fit (Hu and Bentler 1999). To test the relationships predicted, latent regression analysis was performed. The parameter estimates for the latent regression model were within an acceptable range ($\chi^2(57) = 545.95$; RMSEA = .076; TLI = .921; CFI = .942) and the structural model also reflected an acceptable fit (Chen et al. 2008; Hu and Bentler 1999).

Figure 1. Structural equation model results (**p<0.01, ***p<0.001).



All our hypotheses were supported. Controlling for a significant and positive relationship between importance and information-seeking ($\beta = .34$), prior knowledge (familiarity and past experience) was related to information-seeking. Specifically, there was a significant and negative relationship between familiarity and information-seeking ($\beta = -.15$), which indicates that consumers who lack information about food systems are more inclined to seek food information online than those who have prior knowledge. There was also a significant and positive relationship between past experience and information-seeking ($\beta = .18$). In other words, consumers who have previously engaged in food citizenship are more likely to seek food information online than those with no past experiences. Information-seeking increases consumers' engagement in food citizenship ($\beta = .47$), which in turn significantly enhances their sense of place ($\beta = .68$).

Interestingly, there was a significant and positive direct relationship between consumers' information-seeking and their sense of place ($\beta = .11$). When food citizenship mediated this relationship, however, its strength actually increased ($\beta = .32$). This is indicative of a suppressor effect (MacKinnon et al. 2000), which means that food citizenship increases the predictive validity of information-seeking and additively enhances its relationship with sense of place. In other words, consumers can restore their sense of place and establish a connection to agriculture and food production by simultaneously engaging in food citizenship and seeking food information online.

7. Discussion & Conclusions

In this research, we explored what motivates consumers to engage in food citizenship and how such behaviors help consumers to psychologically reconnect with agriculture

and food production. Our qualitative and quantitative findings indicate that consumers engage in food citizenship to learn more about their food systems. Consistent with prior research, we find that food citizenship increases consumers' sense of place. However, consumers' sense of place is not only psychological in nature but also shaped by their everyday physical and online experiences. In other words, both the social and environmental elements of food citizenship can enhance or diminish consumers' sense of place.

Our qualitative study revealed that consumers are largely removed from agriculture and food production, and are also experiencing a decreased sense of place with respect to food systems. Respondents to our online survey indicated a propensity to search online for food information given a lack of prior knowledge and controlling for the importance that they ascribed to obtaining this information. Information-seeking increased their engagement in food citizenship, which in turn enhanced their sense of place. In fact, simultaneously engaging in food citizenship and seeking food information online increased a sense of place that reconnected them to agriculture and food production.

Although these valuable insights were gained from our study, we have several recommendations that future research should address. Notably, the survey questions used in this study were largely derived from an inductive process and reflected the applied rather than theoretical context of this research. Even though the scales showed good reliability, we recommend further validation of these items. In addition, our online survey sample and food citizenship concept statements were limited to the state of Arizona; the potential exists that the high levels of urban sprawl within this state combined with a more "homesteading" tradition may have inflated a sense of place, making food citizenship more attractive as a

means to reconnect to agricultural roots. Other places in the United States may be more or less prone to this type of self-identification than observed in Arizona. A more specific measure of place, such as place attachment or place identity, may be useful to assess these potential differences.

That being said, our qualitative and quantitative findings suggest that the disconnection consumers feel from agriculture and food production can be repaired. Local food systems can help consumers to establish a sense of place by providing them with opportunities for engaging in food citizenship and rekindling a connection to agriculture. Food citizenship also enables consumers to experience community and seasonality through a symbiotic relationship with local agricultural production rather than as merely its end users. In this way, the gap between consumers' food citizenship attitudes and behaviors can be reduced.

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