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Locating the locale of local food: The importance of context, space and social relations

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Abstract

Localization is one process/outcome that is proffered as key to the 'grand challenges' that currently face the food system. Consumers are attributed much agency in this potential transformation, being encouraged from all levels of society to exert their consumer muscle by buying local food. However, due to the social construction of scale it cannot be said that 'local food' is a definite entity and consumers understand the term 'local food' differently depending on their geographic and social context. As such, the research upon which this paper is based aimed to provide a nuanced understanding of how consumers in the particular spatial and social contexts of urban and rural Ireland understood the concept of 'local food'. A specific objective was to test the theory that these consumers may have fallen into the 'local trap' by unquestioningly associating food from a spatially proximate place with positive characteristics. A three-phase mixed methodology was undertaken with a sample of consumers dwelling in urban and rural areas in both Dublin and Galway, Ireland: 1000 householders were surveyed; 6 focus group discussions took place; and 28 semi-structured interviews were carried out. The results presented in this paper indicate that for most participants in this study, spatial proximity is the main parameter against which the 'localness' of food is measured. Also, it was found that participants held multiple meanings of local food and there was a degree of fluidity in their understandings of the term. The results from the case study regions highlight how participants' understandings of local food changed depending on the food in question and its availability. However, the paper also indicates that as consumers move from one place to another, the meaning of local food becomes highly elastic. The meaning is stretched or contracted according to the perceived availability of food, greater or lesser connections to the local producer community and the relative geographic size of participants' locations. Our analysis of findings from all three phases of this research revealed a difference in understandings of local food among participants resident in urban and rural areas: participants dwelling in rural areas were more likely than those in urban areas to define local food according to narrower spatial limits. The paper concludes with an overview of the practical and theoretical significance of these results in addressing the current dearth of research exploring the meaning of local food for consumers and suggests avenues for future research.

Key words: local food, consumers, Ireland, context, embeddedness, local trap

Introduction

This study aimed to critically assess the nature of urban and rural Irish consumers' understandings of 'local food'. The topic of local food has, in recent years, received much attention from policy-makers, industry and grass-roots organizations, among others. This is because in the prevailing food system, the chains through which food travels have become distanciated and multifarious, with elongated links between producers and consumers[1]. The increasingly global orientation of food chains involves growing corporate control and the employment of mass production techniques[2]. Consumers and producers are altered by their increased physical, social and psychological distance, and the dislocation of production from consumption leads to further disconnections. In addition, the global reach of commodity chains can all too easily obscure their ecological effects and this is particularly evident in the food system[3,4]. Therefore, the social and environmental unsustainability of current production practices are acknowledged, and the notion that the prevailing food system must undergo a comprehensive transformation has found widespread acceptance. One process/outcome which is consistently proffered as key

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to this transformation is that of food system localization[5]. Although most commonly associated with a reduction in the environmental impact of the emissions associated with 'food miles'[6,7], local food transactions are also thought to (re)territorialize food, (re)embed social relations into food transactions, and (re)construct localized relationships of care, exchange and cooperation[8,9]. Furthermore, the use of narratives of place and provenance in local food sales represents a financial opportunity for producers, especially since consumers have shown great enthusiasm of late for food of traceable local provenance[10,11].

Given the conceptual power which is attributed to localization by food system actors, grassroots community organizations, policy-makers and academics to affect widespread change in the food system[12–14], it is important to critically interrogate this concept. Specifically, discourses on the socially constructed nature of scale highlight particular problematic binaries that are inherent in prevailing hierarchical understandings of scale, for example local is good, global is bad[15–17]. These socially constructed dualisms have become ontological givens which represent pre-configured accounts of social life rather than reflecting actual socio-spatial relations[18]. As a result of this, instead of simply framing realities, scales have become implicated in the formation of social, economic and political processes[19–23]. These critiques of scalar conceptualizations highlight the fallacy of local food rhetoric which assumes it embodies *only* positive traits. Those who hold a blind belief in the inherent goodness of all things local have, according to Born and Purcell[24], fallen into the 'local trap'. They fetishize local food by attributing certain meanings and effects to it, which may not exist[25]. By focusing only on the place of production this belies the true nature of a food, whereby proximity to place of production can, but does not necessarily, lead to more sustainable or just food systems[26,27]. 'Local trap' rhetoric encourages a more nuanced approach to the examination of local food and food system localization. It does this by highlighting the differences between food localisms that are underpinned by defensive and bounded spatial/scalar conceptualizations, and those that necessarily encourage greater sustainability[28]. In aiming to gain a nuanced understanding of how consumers in Ireland view local food, one key objective of this study was to test the hypothesis that consumers in Ireland may have become 'entrapped' by local food rhetoric. This hypothesis was developed following the emergence of many 'Buy Irish Food' campaigns in Ireland in 2008 and 2009 which were critically analyzed by Carroll[29]. This study found that local provenance was consistently highlighted as a value *per se*, in addition to an emphasis which was placed on potential benefits to producers' livelihoods, to wider economic sustainability and to community resilience. Consumers were reminded of their power to affect these positive changes through their local food purchases. Although it did not hope to test the effectiveness of these particular campaigns, the research upon which this paper is based intended to probe whether consumers in Ireland may have fallen into the 'local trap' which may be likely given the current zeitgeist of local food rhetoric.

Discourses of the socially constructed nature of scales are evidence of the fact that 'local food' is a contested term, varying according to differing social and spatial contexts. Research has found that local food is most often understood in relation to quantifiable spatial distance that the food has travelled to the consumer, demarcated by a radial distance, a political boundary or a bio-region[30–36]. However, Whitehead[37] has argued that 'local food' could also be understood as referring to a particular context, meaning or interaction, while others have suggested that definitions of 'local food' often go beyond space to incorporate social factors such as a small scale of production, use of traditional production methods, family farm provenance, or a connection, face-to-face interaction, relationship, regard or trust between the food producer and consumer[12,38,39]. Severson[40] clearly holds the view that local food is about much more than spatial proximity:

> The local foods movement is about an ethic of food that values reviving small scale, ecological, place-based, and relationship-based food systems … Large corporations peddling junk food are the exact opposite of what this is about. (p. D-1)

Eriksen[41] attempted to reflect the complexity of this concept in developing a local food taxonomy, bringing together what she refers to three 'domains of proximity'. The first domain is geographical proximity, that is when a food is produced close by; the second is relation proximity which describes the direct relationship or interaction between productions and consumers that exists in short food supply chains; and the third domain of proximity in Eriksen's taxonomy is values of proximity which refers to symbolic positive characteristics that are often associated with local food. Therefore, the aim of this research is to probe the extent to which issue of space as well as less quantifiable issues such as relations, networks and other qualitative elements are incorporated into the understandings of consumers in Ireland of 'local food'.

Hereafter, this paper shall focus on a specific context within food systems, that is, consumption. This focus aims to build on growing contributions to knowledge on the consumer perspective[42–44] which are barely keeping pace with the broad existing body of literature on production in the food system[45–49]. Consumption, Miller claims[50], should be recognized for its role in shaping culture and, as such, his work eschews a focus on material objects alone. Instead, he examines subject–object dualisms and, by extension, the power of the consumer to shape the economy and ultimately, society. The research upon which this paper is based follows Miller in that it recognizes the importance of examining the relationship between consumers in Ireland (subjects) and local food

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(object) because of the former's role in shaping the local food system. Miller[51] also argues that in modern secular societies, values have become emplaced into the everyday realm, including the area of consumption. Commodities, therefore, have become fetishized; they are talismans with meanings and effects which go beyond their materiality. Again, following Miller's lead, this paper theorizes that local food is a value-laden concept for consumers in Ireland.

That is not to say that 'local food' is not fetishized by consumers in other countries, but rather, this work chooses to probe this particular geographic context. Indeed, it is important to focus on geography in examining consumption; every commodity has a 'spatial life', embodying and producing spatial relationship, leading Goodman et al.[52] to argue that, '... *we are* where *we consume*' (p. 3). This paper does not make any claims as to Irish exceptionalism with regard to how local food is understood among consumers. Rather it recognizes that every geographic consumption context is unique because of the unique confluence of various spatial and social elements therein. However, it is theorized that consumers in Ireland may be more unique than others for a number of reasons. Ireland is considered a Northern European country but it occupies a peripheral location and is spatially defined by its island geography. Ireland has strong social and cultural connections to agriculture. It has a high percentage of rural dwellers (38%)[53] compared to Britain (excluding Scotland, 18%)[54], many continental European countries (France, 14%, Germany, 26%) and the USA (18%)[55], and it has a low population density. Almost two-thirds of its land is under agricultural production[56], 12% of the working population are employed in food system work[57] and Ireland derives almost 10% of its GDP from agri-food activities[58]. These factors highlight that previous studies conducted in different geographic contexts may not be indicative of the perspective of consumers in Ireland as to 'local food'. In addition, these factors emphasize the great potential for food system localization in Ireland, as well as the importance of food system sustainability and this is evidenced by the nature and extent of emergent 'Buy Irish Food' campaigns[29]. This study hopes to make further contributions to knowledge in this area by focusing solely on the consumer perspective.

Discourses of sustainable consumption emphasize the powerful role of consumers to affect food system change[59]; by flexing their metaphorical muscle, they can exert the influence of 'consumer demand' to encourage a shortening, both spatially and socially, of food system chains[60]. Some have gone beyond attributions of agency to argue that consumers have a *responsibility* to work toward greater sustainability and this has been criticized as perpetuating a hegemonic neoliberal policy of devolution of responsibility away from policymakers[61]. These criticisms see the exercise of consumption as conceptually separate from the exercise of citizenship[62]. However, researchers such as Kjaernes and Holm[63] argue that this dualistic thinking is restrictive as it fails to recognize the role of a citizen–consumer hybrid. That is, it is argued that consumers can indeed play a role in transforming the food system toward one which fosters environmental care and social justice, by making responsible food choices[5,64]. In order to ensure that food choices are more oriented by altruistic citizenship concerns, as opposed to traditional consumerist personal concerns, it is important to gain a greater understanding of the consumer perspective. This represents the central aim of this paper.

Maintaining a focus on consumers as a specific segment of the food chain, this paper acknowledges that consumers' values potentially differ from those of other actors such as policymakers, producers and retailers[65,66]. Nonetheless, it is important to remember that just as consumers and others in the food chain vary in how they view local food, consumers may also differ amongst themselves in these views. The social and spatial contexts of consumption activities are essential to our investigation because how, why, where and what one (can) consume(s) are all affected by these. For example, those from large places, in terms of both population and space, tend to attribute wider space-based definitions to 'local food' as Onken et al.[10], Coit[33] and Khan and Prior[67] found in their respective studies of consumers in the mid-Atlantic region of the USA, the USA more broadly, and in urban central England. Furthermore, research has found that urbanites are more likely than their rural counterparts to equate local food transactions with proximate and direct interactions with food producers. In contrast, rural dwellers have been found to accept food sourced from a food system intermediary who they consider to be *socially* local as satisfying their understanding of local food[68,69]. These variations could be attributed to the differing contexts, norms and values of these places and it is not illogical to expect even greater variations across nations or supranational regions. Research has highlighted that consumers in the USA may be more likely to define local food spatially, compared to in the UK where it has been found that spatial factors are considered in conjunction with the customs and traditions of a given area[70]. The Northern European perspective on local food is said to differ from that in Southern Europe; as Northern European cultures are arguably farther removed from the origins of their food, they are less likely to expand their definition of local food beyond short distances to encompass concepts of knowhow and *terroir*, as is the case in countries such as France, Italy and Spain[71,72]. How Irish consumers view local food cannot clearly be aligned with either the Northern or Southern European perspectives. This is because of the dominance of rural and agricultural heritage in Ireland, similar to Southern European countries, but also because of the absence of a strong traditional and locality food culture which is the case in Northern European countries. Before progressing, it is important to note that this paper is interested in

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'local food' and not 'locality food' which traditionally Southern European *terroir* foods represent. The former label represents food that is sourced from a spatially and possibly socially proximate place, while the latter is that which has a spatially embedded character, but which can be marketed anywhere, whether that is a local or a non-local location.

In addition to addressing a core gap in knowledge on encouraging sustainable consumption in food systems, the research discussed in this paper is unique as there has yet to be a study that examines the specific context of heterogeneous Irish consumers and their understandings of 'local food'. It theorizes that findings may differ from similar studies which have been conducted in other locations, given Ireland's unusual geographic context and the particular role that agriculture plays in Ireland's economy and culture. As such, using a multi-phase mixed methodology, this paper provides a highly nuanced description and critical discussion of how consumers in urban and rural contexts across two case-study locations in Ireland understand local food. A specific objective of this study was to test the hypothesis that many consumers in Ireland have fallen into the 'local trap' by conflating characteristics of local provenance with certain issues that are often presented as foundational to this concept but which may not necessarily be present. These include particular processes (e.g., extensive production methods), networks (e.g., shortened distribution chains) and relations (e.g., transactions which are embedded with knowledge or social connections) [14,73].

Methods

This study focused on two counties within the Republic of Ireland, Dublin and Galway, counties situated on Ireland's east and west coast, respectively. As a three-phase study (see Fig. 1), three distinct sampling strategies were employed to select and recruit participants. A common theme running through all three phases' recruitment was the selection of equal numbers of urban and rural participants. In Phase 1, 1000 households were selected to complete a large-scale survey using a multi-stage cluster sampling technique: electoral divisions (EDs) were clustered according to average household income bands and then according to rural or urban status before ten EDs were selected for each county. A sample of 1000 domestic dwellings was then randomly chosen for the selected EDs from the GeoDirectory Irish address database. One hundred and five surveyed householders consented to be invited to participate in further research and this group was used as the sample population for Phase 3 of this study. This group underwent a further multi-scale clustering, based on urban or rural location and demographic information, such as gender, which had been gathered in Phase 1. Fifty-six of the group of 105 Phase 1 survey respondents were invited by letter and email to contact the researcher to arrange an interview, and the response rate was high at 50% ($n = 28$).

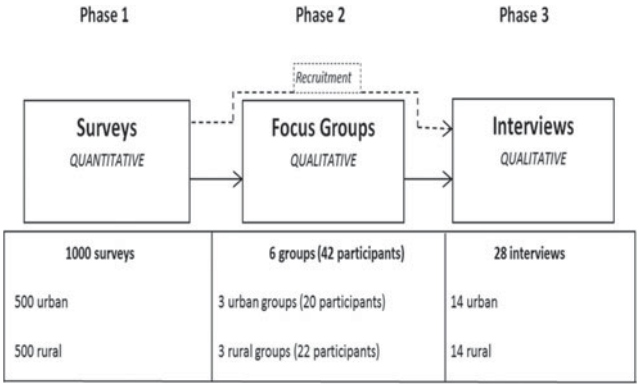

Figure 1. Diagram of methodological approach.

Phase 2's sampling strategy was more purposive than those of Phases 1 and 3 as it involved the selection of six pre-existing homogeneous groups. Despite criticisms of engaging with homogeneous groups, their use is common in environmental and consumer research[74,75]. This is because ideas are often formed and decisions made within a specific social context and to an extent these can be recreated by clustering people according to their 'natural' social milieu[74]. Recruitment for Phase 2's groups was done by contacting a gatekeeper, either through existing networks or by using contact information from public sources. Details of the profile of these groups can be found in Fig. 2.

The data discussed in this paper comprise a small proportion of that which was gathered during a 4-year doctoral study. As part of this doctoral study, five questions were inserted into a large-scale quantitative survey (Phase 1, see Fig. 1) which was undertaken as part of a wider and distinct project named *Consensus*. An ongoing study, the Consensus Project examines attitudes and behaviors toward household consumption in Ireland, with a specific focus on food, energy, water and transport (for more information see www.consensus.ie). This Consensus survey was carried out over an 11-month period from June 2010 to April 2011. This paper draws on data obtained from just one question on this survey: Question 23 asked 'What do you consider "local food" to be?' and respondents were provided with five closed responses in addition to an 'Other' option. The data gathered in answer to this question were coded numerically and exported to a software package which enabled statistical analysis. Uni-variate frequency analysis was undertaken on Question 23 to show the proportionate distribution of understandings of the term 'local food' which was held among participants. A bi-variate analysis was also carried out, whereby Question 23 was cross-tabulated with demographic data on urban and rural location, amongst other variables.

Schnell[76] asserts that '... (a)ny attempts to understand what the idea of "local" means to consumers must not

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	Dublin (D)	**Galway** (G)
Urban (U)	FG2 (DU) *Employees of large multi-national tech corporation*	FG4 (GU) *Transition Towns group members*
	FG3 (DU) *MA students in sustainable agriculture and rural development*	
Rural (R)	FG1 (DR) *Women's sports team*	FG5 (GR) *Active retirement group*
		FG6 (GR) *Community garden members*

Figure 2. Details of focus group (Phase 2) member constituents.

discard . . . (its) . . . complexity in favor of rhetorical, ideological, and quantifiable simplification' (p. 620). Therefore, building on the large-scale quantitative data obtained from this Phase 1 survey question, Phase 2's focus group discussions and Phase 3's semi-structured interviews sought to provide a deeper and more nuanced appreciation of how participants understood the term 'local food'. It was at this stage that the objective of testing whether participants had fallen into the 'local trap' was undertaken. Participants were asked a number of direct questions on what they understood 'local food' to mean, but in addition character vignettes and choice exercises were used to elicit views on the importance of spatial and non-spatial factors. Examples of questions asked include: 'Is local food more than about where the food comes from?', 'Can local food come from close by but be made in a big factory by a multinational company?' and 'Is food only local if you have some sort of interaction with the producer?'.

All focus group discussions and interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim, providing a large amount of raw text, the content of which was analyzed to identify recurrent themes. All participants were given pseudonyms to protect their anonymity. The emergent themes were openly coded and these codes were used to build concepts; this process was iterative, with data checked against auxiliary notes to ensure they were suitably classified. Codes were evaluated according to the frequency with which they arose in discussions and also according to how strongly participants appeared to feel about each statement, which was established from an implicit reading of the data. This technique of analysis also facilitated a comparison of different groups, for example, urban and rural dwellers. Findings based on how participants from all three phases understood 'local food' were compared and three distinct themes emerged which will be presented and discussed here.

Before proceeding to discuss the results, it is important to note some potential limitations of this study. The sampling of urban and rural participants in this study cannot be said to have yielded results which are necessarily representative of these populations. This is because participants were selected on the basis of their current address and, given the trend in recent years in Ireland towards urbanization, it may be the case that many participants in urban areas retained the cultural values of their rural place of origin. To have overcome this limitation, it would have been necessary to conduct full biographical and narrative interviews. However, this study neither aimed to do, nor had the resources for, such an exploration. Nonetheless, comparisons that are presented in this paper are certainly indicative of the broader differences between urban and rural dwellers' understandings of local food. Future studies could probe these differences in greater depth. A second potential limitation of this study was the use of a closed question in the survey of Phase 1 to probe respondents' understandings of local food (Q23). Although the results arising from this particular question were certainly useful, the hindsight which analysis has provided on the complexity of consumers' understandings highlights the value that would have been gained from asking this question in an open-ended way. Nonetheless, given the qualitative and semi-structured nature of investigations in Phases 2 and 3, this particular deficiency is thought to have been remedied with the use of more open and probing questions.

Results and Discussion

These findings are organized according to three distinct but related emergent topics. The first is the importance of spatial proximity as well as social embeddedness in framing understandings of local food. Embeddedness is a concept that recognizes the intrinsic connection between social factors and economic transactions; a transaction that is characterized by embeddedness has a high degree of connectivity, reciprocity and trust involved[8,77]. The second emergent topic to be presented here is the fluidity and plurality of participants' understandings. And the third is the differences between the conceptualizations of urban and rural dwellers of

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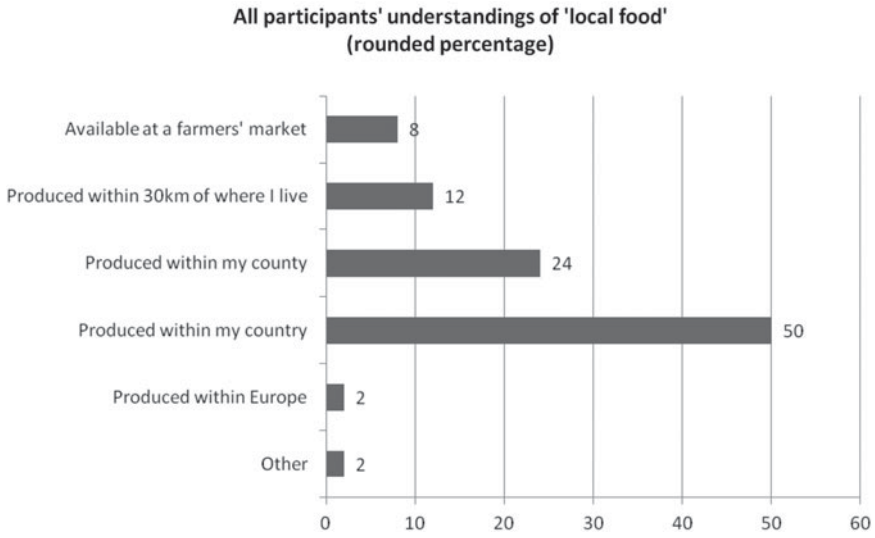

Figure 3. Phase 1, Meaning of 'local food', all participants.

'local food', these differences being contingent upon embedded social relations and perceptions of availability. These findings go beyond much existing literature which quantifies acceptable spatial ranges of 'local food' by providing an in-depth and nuanced qualitative understanding of the sample population's views. A key theme that emerged throughout the analysis was the importance of embedded social relations in constructions of what 'local food' means. This finding, in turn, informed the key objective of this study, namely a testing of the 'local trap' hypothesis. However, having assessed the extent to which conceptualizations of consumers in Ireland of 'local food' are based on spatial valorization, it became clear that 'local trap' rhetoric itself was in need of critical assessment.

Definitions of 'local food' are based on spatial proximity and embeddedness of social relations

Results from the initial large-scale questionnaire in Phase 1 show that 90% of all respondents selected definitions of local which were based on spatial delineations and varying limits of closeness (see Fig. 3). Further qualitative investigations in the form of focus groups and in-depth interviews confirmed this preference for space-based definitions of local food among participants in this study. Most participants in both Phases 2 and 3 reported to favor spatial ranges which were either marked out by radial distance or a codified boundary (e.g., produced within my parish, produced within my county). These findings concur with previous research from the USA[78,79]. However, further analysis suggests that consumers in Ireland may differ from consumers elsewhere in their accepted spatial limits of localness. A key disparity between findings from Phase 1 and a similar UK survey[80] is that 50% of respondents in the former defined 'local food' according to national limits, compared to just 5% in the latter. This conflation of 'local' with 'Irish' was probed further in Phases 2 and 3, and comments made by participants who were originally from the USA and Australia were particularly insightful in this respect:

> I think . . . (what is local) . . . is a matter of distance too, because . . . Ireland is the size of one of our states. We're used to . . . (greater distances) . . . 'local' obviously is a different term . . . it can be within fifty miles, one hundred miles, however many kilometres that is versus half way across our country, you know, which is ten times the difference . . . [Jim, FG3:DU]

> . . . local is definitely in the Galway area or even in Ireland . . . I suppose being Australian does influence me that way because Australia is so big . . . Ireland to me is local because it's the size of my state . . . [Trish, FG4:GU]

These data suggest that a conceptualization of 'local' which extends as far as national boundaries is likely uncommon in many other countries. Indeed, Zepeda and Levitan-Reid[70] found that many US consumers defined a local food space as that which was within a 6 or 7 h drive, or as being within their state (Wisconsin) and neighboring states. These differences in understandings of the acceptable range of local food are clearly attributable to the comparatively small area of Ireland: one could drive from Ireland's north coast to its south coast in the 6–7 h time scale that was cited by Zepeda and Levitan-Reid's participants; in addition, the state of Wisconsin has an area that is a little over twice the area of the island of Ireland. Conversely, Berg et al.[81] argue that Norwegian consumers see all domestic produce as 'local' and therefore safe. They attribute this, in part, to the fact that Norway is a small homogeneous country, as Ireland is, and this similarity could also be attributable to both

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Norway's and Ireland's peripheral positions in Europe. Therefore, this research highlights the importance of geographic context in understandings of 'local food'.

This research has also found that the local frontier is denoted, at least in the minds of some participants, by limits that could be considered fuzzy and tautological, for example from 'close by', or from 'up/down the road'. This finding reflects those from a study published by the Irish food board (Bord Bia)[82] which indicated that the most popular definition of local food (45%) was that which comes from 'close by'. This finding also reflects results from a US study which found similar ambiguity in the exact range of 'localness'[76]. Such designations may at first appear elusive: local is from close by, close by is local. However, participants appeared to understand implicitly, personally and possibly uniquely where the limits of localness lay. For these participants, what is and is not local is not an intellectual issue but is based instead on a pre-cognitive visceral evaluation of what is 'your own'. This became evident following analysis of discussions on the importance of buying local food and is illustrated by the following exchange between Focus Group 1 (DRN) participants:

> . . . I think you kind of have to look after your own . . . first . . . [Odette]

> . . . absolutely looking after your own . . . (is important) . . . I mean at the end of the day, we're Irish . . . (do) . . . you know what I mean? [Siún]

Therefore, this study has found that not only is the meaning of 'local food' dependent on geographical context, it depends on personal context, thus emphasizing the social construction of localness.

In contrast to the majority of participants in this study who based their understanding of 'local food' on spatially proximate origins, just 8% of Phase 1 respondents selected 'Available at a farmers' market' as their chosen signifier of localness (see Fig. 3), thus incorporating social conditions into their conceptualization of 'local food'. Similarly, a small number of participants in Phases 2 and 3 contended that issues such as the scale and manner of production, and the directness of supply chain were fundamental to the designation of a food as 'local':

> . . . for me local would definitely be associated with a local scale as well as . . . a small scale . . . On first thought it would definitely be . . . the antithesis of . . . a large corporation . . . (which is selling) . . . mass produced . . . (food) . . . I think . . . (small scale local producers take into account) . . . a lot more . . . ethical concerns [Marian, FG4: GU]

> My understanding of local would be going into the (farmers') market in Galway and buying from the people who are selling their stuff there. I would regard them as local . . . I don't think . . . (food in a supermarket can be local because) . . . you're not meeting . . . (producers) . . . face-to-face . . . [Colin, I27:GU]

Representing two scales of Eriksen's local food taxonomy[41], for these participants, food was 'local' if it was from a spatially proximate place (geographical proximity) and if it embodied particular qualitative issues[37] (values of proximity). These included production with few or no chemicals, being homemade, handmade or made on a small scale, or being sold more directly, ideally by the primary producer in a face-to-face transaction. Nonetheless, when expressly probed on the importance of such considerations, a majority of participants in the qualitative phases of this study contended that these non-spatial issues were *not* integral to their understanding of a 'local food'. In fact, many explicitly argued that a 'local' designation was not weakened by a large and/or industrial scale of production, or by the fact that a food may pass through the hands of many intermediaries before being purchased in a large multinational supermarket. This is illustrated by Evelyn's (FG1:DR) comment that *Brennan's Bread* is local because it '. . . is only made up the road . . . ', despite the fact that this bread is produced on an industrial scale and is sold in practically every shop and supermarket in the country.

In using these findings to test the 'local trap' hypothesis[24], it would appear that a majority of participants have indeed fallen into this conceptual 'trap'. This is because they did not base their understandings of local food on qualitative elements that are often cited as foundational to the beneficial localization of food systems, such as a small scale of production and no involvement of multinational corporations. However, a more detailed reading of the data suggests that this assertion might be misleading as it is too dualistic and it fails to recognize the complexity and nuance of the concept of 'local food' for participants. Local trap rhetoric relies on a narrative of the unreflexive actor—in this case, the consumer—who either assumes 'local food' embodies a number of positive traits, or does not assume this. What has emerged in this study is a very different reality in which conceptualizations of local food are based on an understanding of who and what is 'our own', and the extent to which participants believe their purchases will benefit those in the local community and the wider economy. This is illustrated by the following exchange between the researcher and one particular participant, Evelyn (FG1:DR), on the topic of local bread:

> . . . I only buy Johnston, Mooney and O'Brien (bread) because . . . (my friend) . . . Serena works there and it's local . . . [Evelyn]

> . . . so . . . you think Johnston, Mooney and O'Brien Bread is 'local' . . . ? [Researcher]

> Yes absolutely. I think it's an image thing. Like in a (farmers') market it . . . (looks) . . . like your granny made it but . . . Johnston Mooney and O'Brien (bread) is in proper packaging and it's got a label on it . . . [Evelyn]

Evelyn contended that despite being produced on an industrial scale and sold in conventional retail fora,

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Johnston, Mooney and O'Brien Bread (also a nationally recognized brand of sliced pan bread) was 'local' because it came embedded with social relations as her friend was involved in its production. Evelyn knew that a purchase of this bread helped to keep her friend employed. In addition, it can be surmised that she was cognizant of the broader benefits of purchasing this 'local food'.

Local food is defined both fluidly and plurally

Data from all three phases of this research suggest that 'food which is produced within Ireland' was the most common meaning of local food but further in-depth study provides a more nuanced insight into participants' definitions. In fact, not only was there deviation among participants in relation to the meaning of local food but data also indicated varied understandings *within* individual participants. With the variables and vagaries of everyday life, participants' held multiple understandings of different types, levels or stages of local food. Research at Phases 2 and 3 investigated this fluidity of understandings and at both phases it was found that although the meaning of local food *can be* 'Irish food', this is not always the case with other 'levels' also accepted. These understandings of 'local' may, for example, start at the parish level, go up to county level and ultimately end at the national level, as this quote from Helen illustrates:

> I equate local with sort of like . . . (the neighbouring town of) . . . Malahide and around, all this area . . . (the wider) . . . Fingal area if you like. Then the next follow on . . . ('local' range is) . . . Ireland . . . [Helen, I5:DR]

These differing understandings appeared to exist simultaneously and to vary according to particular circumstances. Reflecting Ostrom's findings[73] that participants' definitions of 'local food' depended on the type of food in question and how available it was in a given region, participants in this study defined local food neither rigidly, according to strict criteria, nor singularly, according to one prescribed standard.

In Phase 1, a small number of participants asserted that their understandings of local food differed according to the food in question (these were some of the participants who chose the 'Other' option in response to Question 23). Analysis of data arising from Phases 2 and 3 also found that the type of food in question was influential in shifting participants' understandings of local food from one scalar 'level' to another. This was because certain foods are more or less available in a given area. For participants in this study, if a food *could be* produced very close by, such a food was only considered to be local when it actually *did* come from this proximate place. For example, Nicholas (I3:DR) from Portmarnock in North Country Dublin reported that fish was 'local' to him only if it was landed at the harbor of the neighboring town of Howth. Similarly, David (I14:GU) from Galway City stated that lamb was 'local' to him only if it came from the adjacent area of Connemara in County Galway, which is famous for this particular product.

Correspondingly, Lisa (FG6:GR) from County Galway reported that she would be willing to extend her understanding of local food (from within a 10–15 km radius) to include artisan cheese and cured meats from the western region of County Cork, an area which is a hub for these products in Ireland and is located a distance of almost 250 km from where she lived. She expressed the opinion that such products were unavailable within her first local scalar range, or indeed in subsequent ranges. In addition, if the raw ingredients of certain products could not be produced in a location which was conceptualized as local due to environmental constraints, for example chocolate and tea, a number of participants reported that such ingredients could be transformed through processing in a local place into a local food, reflecting findings in similar studies[66,69]. This was particularly true for those foods that were manufactured by a company that was considered to be local. Commonly cited examples of this included Cadbury's chocolate, which has a manufacturing plant in Dublin, and Barry's tea, which is the leading tea brand in Ireland.

A second condition to emerge in this study which affected the changeability and plurality of understandings of local food was the physical location of participants when they were procuring food. For both Lynne (I23:DU) and Joe (I20:DU), their definitions of local food changed when they themselves moved from Dublin City where they lived, to rural areas. For both of these participants, when they were in urban Dublin 'local food' equaled 'Irish food', but as they moved to rural areas their understanding of the range of local food, in a figurative sense, shrank to a smaller spatial scale. In the case of these two particular participants, each had their own justification for these varying conceptions. Lynne specified that 'local food' meant something different to her when she was 'at home', in the village in which she grew up, in rural West Cork. The change in definition was based on personal knowledge of producers and her connection to their mutual community:

> Well when I'm in Dublin . . . I think local just means Irish . . . And then down at home, it means Cork . . . I suppose I'm from West Cork . . . and when we're down at home then you tend to buy . . . all the names and . . . family produce that you know . . . But in Dublin it's more invisible . . . who everybody is . . . I think Irish but I don't think Dublin . . . It would be important if I lived in a smaller community I guess . . . [Lynne]

Similarly, Joe talked of how his understanding of local food changed. He believed that local food from a county or narrower range was simply not available in Dublin, in contrast to the rural area where he holidayed:

> What would your definition of 'local food' be? [Researcher]

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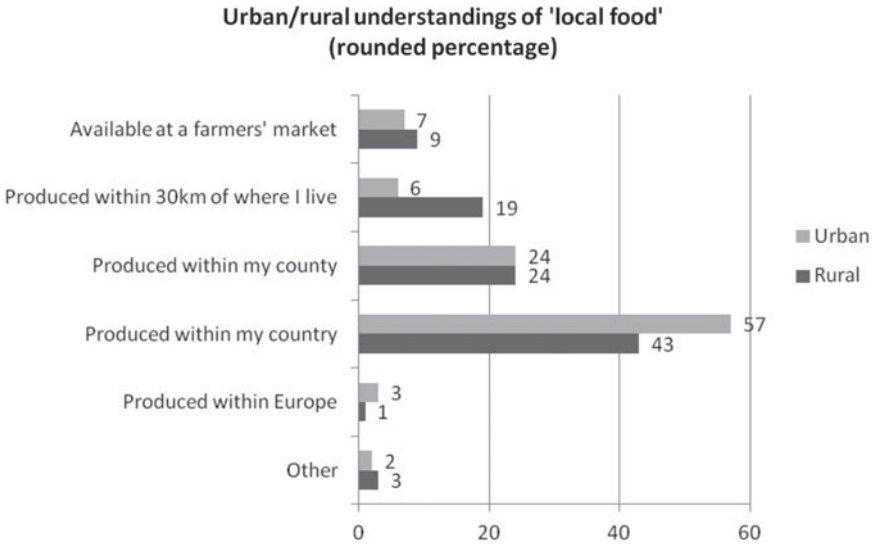

Figure 4. Phase 1, Meaning of 'local food' for urban and rural participants.

> OK say we're down the country . . . this week . . . and I wanted some local fruit and veg and I asked for local produce and I got local potatoes and local eggs, and local bread. So they were all made down there . . . Then after that it would be . . . local is Irish. [Joe]
>
> OK so your 'first' local would be . . . the county . . . or even narrower than that? [Researcher]
>
> The first local would be narrower than that. It would be locally sourced. For instance again, like I'll give the example in Castletown there and I went out of my way to source locally-caught fish and to use it there and then. [Joe]
>
> Do you make as much of an effort when you're in Dublin to do the same? [Researcher]
>
> No. [Joe]
>
> And why do you think that is? [Researcher]
>
> It's because there's the perception there that there isn't any local . . . (food). The only thing I might do in Dublin is when we're shopping, and I would often go shopping with my wife, we'd look for Irish labels and Irish producers and the classic example of that is tomatoes. They might be Dutch but I'll try to find an Irish one.' [Joe]

The issue of current location was also relevant for the previously quoted Jim (FG3:DU) and Trish (FG4:GU). Now living in Ireland, the acceptable spatial range for local food narrowed significantly as they moved from their large native countries of the USA and Australia to their smaller adopted country of Ireland.

As such, building on findings from the preceding section, in particular that social embeddedness is an important element for many participants in their conceptualization of 'local food', this section has emphasized the relevance of participants' personal context, experiences, networks and milieus. Depending on the foods they liked to eat, which specific types of these foods they preferred, their imagined or actual connections to a community, or their location, participants' constructions of 'local food' were liable to vary. These findings pre-empt any claims as to participants having fallen into the 'local trap' by blindly valorizing their local spaces and foods from there. This is because these findings emphasize that the processes by which participants come to understand local food are too complicated to be explained by reductionist evaluations of whether they do or do not 'fall' into the 'local trap'.

Urban and rural dwellers' understandings of 'local food' can be contrasted because of differences in their embedded social relations

Due to the sampling strategy of this study which saw an equal selection of participants residing in urban and rural areas, it was possible to draw comparisons between the understandings of 'local food' which existed within these two groups. As illustrated in Fig. 4, Phase 1 data suggest that urban survey respondents were more likely to favor 'Produced within my country' as their definition of local food, with 57% choosing this option. This compared to 43% of rural respondents who chose the same option. Conversely, higher proportions of respondents living in rural areas opted for 'Produced within 30 kilometers of where I live' (19%) to explain local food, compared to just 6% of respondents living in urban areas. These survey findings were echoed in the later research phases with many focus group and interview participants who lived in urban areas having broader spatial conceptualizations of the meaning of 'local food':

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> . . . Irish is plenty for me. It doesn't have to be any closer . . . (to be local food) . . . [Raymond, FG2:DU]

> . . . I think . . . in the grand scheme of where . . . things come from, anything from Ireland, produced in Ireland, by anyone in Ireland is local compared to the rest of the stuff . . . [Flora, FG3:DU]

> . . . (local food can be) . . . Irish . . . (It) . . . doesn't have to be . . . (from) . . . my county . . . [Ita, I26:GU]

This contrasted to participants living in rural areas who tended to explain local food according to narrow spatial terms:

> . . . local and Irish . . . (are) . . . different . . . [Siún, FG1:DR]

> . . . I think local is your immediate catchment area. I would perceive it to be within . . . five, ten miles . . . [Ursula, FG6: GR]

> . . . I'd say North County Dublin would be local . . . [Pauline, I15:DR]

Rural areas are the predominant location of primary production and rural dwellers are therefore spatially and socially closer to the origins of their food, as illustrated by this segment of the discussion which took place in Focus Group 1 (DR):

> I think because we live out in the countryside . . . going back to the potato thing, if I . . . saw a bag of Keogh's (potatoes) compared to . . . a bag of something else, I'd get Keogh's because I know it's . . . (from) . . . down the road [Evelyn]

> So you have an actual connection with them . . . ? [Researcher]

> Yes [All participants]

> We'd all know them, so we get Keogh's. We were at the . . . (recent) . . . wedding . . . (of a member of the Keogh family) [Rachel]

Echoing the findings from the preceding results sections, this segment of dialogue illustrates the importance of embedded social relations. Although these rural participants did not buy Keogh's potatoes in a face-to-face transaction or in an alternative sales forum, they were buying a product to which they perceived they had a personal and community connection. Although there were several other rural participants who voiced similar opinions, there were no urban participants who did so. This was possibly due to the spatial and social distance between rural production and urban consumption. Indeed, Mary-Ann, a rural participant (I4:DR) was cognizant of the access that she had to local food from very close by, due to her rural place of residence:

> . . . to me, Irish . . . (food is local food but) . . . the closer to home the better. If I see something from Rush . . . (I would like to buy it.) . . . I suppose it's because we're in a slightly rural area, . . . I know that there's farming . . . in Rush . . . (and it) . . . is . . . ten minutes down the road . . . [Mary-Ann]

Correspondingly, many urban dwellers *perceived* a lack of availability of local food (from a very close place) and they *had to* expand their definition of local food. In the preceding section, evidence from discussions with Joe (I20:DU) and Lynne (I23:DU) highlighted their perceptions of closer connections and greater accessibility to the place, processes and networks of food when they were situated in rural areas. This finding confirms Weatherall et al.'s[83] thesis that social embeddedness and disembeddedness results in contrasting levels of regard for local food and its producers, and consequently, divergent levels of local food purchasing across urban and rural populations.

It is interesting to note that Joe's view fails to reflect the *actual* level of availability of food that is produced in close proximity. That is, although he perceived there to be a lack of food from 'close by' when in the urban area where he lived, a large region of agricultural production exists relatively close to his home. Joe lived in South Dublin City, located a distance of approximately thirty kilometers from North County Dublin, which is the center of horticulture in Ireland. This area generates 30% of all field produced vegetables in Ireland and is home to 40% of all Irish agricultural production, and this produce is almost entirely marketed in Ireland, with most of it staying in the wider Dublin area[84]. Despite the relative proximity of North County Dublin to where he lived, Joe seemed unaware of its status as a food production area. Although North County Dublin is spatially proximate, this particular participant lacked a connection to the food production community there. North County Dublin, to Joe, was therefore spatially close but socially distant and, consequently, he did not classify food from there as 'local'.

The concept of embedded social relations emerged strongly in this section of analysis and is evident throughout the discussion of these findings. The differing urban and rural contexts of participants in this study affected the extent to which they perceived social relations to be embedded in local food transactions, and as a consequence, affected how they viewed 'local food'. It is these levels of embeddedness which inform our testing of the 'local trap' hypothesis. Rather than fitting the description of either an unthinking group who valorize the local space and all therein, or a highly critical and reflective body of people who consider all elements of their food's origins thus side-stepping this 'trap', both urban and rural participants sit somewhere in between these two.

Reflections on the understandings of 'local food' among consumers in Ireland

Previous research has established the ambiguity and complexity of 'local food'[13,41,85] and the findings presented here build on this by contributing new aspects to help in understanding this concept. Each of the three preceding sections has provided a layer(s) of understanding to existing knowledge on the acceptable spatial extent of 'local food'[70,78] and on the relevance of non-spatial

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factors, such as processes, networks and relationships, in these understandings[14,73,76,85]. Considering together all of the themes that have been discussed thus far, a single unifying thread emerges, that is, the importance of context in how 'local food' is conceptually constructed by consumers. This study theorized that spatial context will affect views on local food and, to test this, the focus in this study was on consumers in Ireland, and participants who were dwelling in both urban and rural areas were purposively sampled. This thesis appears to have been confirmed as spatial context emerged as a relevant issue. However, spatial context has a mutually constitutive relationship with social context; where one comes from will shape personal experiences, social networks, culture and values. This finding reflects Jackson and Holbrook's thesis that a key characteristic of contemporary shopping practices is that it is a socially situated activity[86]. These issues are undoubtedly also shaped by various demographic features such as life stage, gender or educational attainment but, for now, the focus will remain on the role of place in shaping how one interacts with the world. Specifically, many participants in this study who were living in rural areas inhabited a social world that was qualitatively different to that of their urban counterparts. For example, the livelihoods of those in their close social circles relied on agri-food production, the spaces and landscapes they inhabited were agrarian, and their social lives were shaped by a common understanding of rural life. This resulted in contrasting views on 'local food' between the urban and rural groups, as rural dwellers are more aware of the processes involved in agri-food production and will be more directly affected by the support of local food systems. This reflects Selfa and Qazi's[69], finding that rural consumers were more acutely aware than their urban counterparts of the effect of their local food purchases on supporting farmers and farmland. Nonetheless, it can be surmised that it is the unique spatial and social context of Ireland—as a peripheral island nation with a high proportion of rural dwellers and a strong agricultural tradition—that has an effect on the social context of people in Ireland, specifically how they understand and value local food.

Although it is alternative food networks that are normally described as having a 'socially embedded character'[8] (p. 47), participants in this study also imagined more mainstream food systems to be imbued with embeddedness[77]. Winter[26] is apt to agree with this viewpoint in his critique of the false dichotomy between alternative and conventional food systems. Hinrichs argues[77] that embeddedness should not be viewed '… simply as a friendly antithesis to the market' (p. 296) but every transaction should be seen as having degrees of marketness and degrees of embeddedness[8,26,77]. It is argued here that Winter's rejections of a dualistic vision of 'good' and 'bad' transactions in favor of a more nuanced understanding quite accurately describes the reality of consumer views, at least in relation to local food. Correspondingly, 'local trap' rhetoric[24] envisages consumers as one of two sorts. Either they are the type who passively falls into the trap of focusing only on the spatially proximate place of production, or they actively avoid this trap by reflexively considering issues of quality, networks or process. However, the results of this study illustrate the fallacy of such dualistic thinking. All three results sections have at their cores findings of a blend of unreflexive visceral feelings of what is 'local' with more considered reflections on qualitative issues. This finding is supported by the notion that contemporary consumers are characteristically knowledgeable and active subjects in their shopping practices[86].

Conclusion

This research aimed to provide a nuanced insight into how consumers in two places in Ireland understood the concept of 'local food'. A key objective of this aim was to assess the extent to which study participants could be considered to have fallen into the 'local trap' by making blind positive assumptions about food from a 'local' space. The results illustrate the highly contextualized nature of participants' understandings, with their differing spatialities contributing to varied and nuanced conceptualizations of 'local food'. Results also pointed to the importance for some participants of embedded social relations in constructions of 'local food'. Interestingly, the version of embeddedness which is presented here may not adhere to idealized visions of local food transactions which eschew many elements of 'marketness'. In respect to the objective of testing the 'local trap' hypothesis, a superficial reading of the data would suggest that it has been proven by the findings of all three sections. However, it became clear that this conclusion did not accurately reflect the true nature of participants' conceptualizations of 'local food' and, as such, the need to critique 'local trap' rhetoric became obvious. As such, it is argued here that the idea that consumers can be simply classified as those that either do, or do not, fall into the trap of automatically assuming 'local food' is a wholly positive entity is fallacious. This is because local trap rhetoric relies on binary visions of the uncritical consumer on one hand and the highly reflective consumer on the other hand. Indeed, previous research in the area of sustainable consumption has emphasized the often chimeric nature of consumers who exhibit supposedly contradictory values and behaviors, for example 'alternative hedonists'[62]. Therefore, we argue that as the concept of the 'local trap' fails to recognize the highly contextualized, nuanced, socially and spatially embedded situation in which consumers interact with local food and negotiate its meaning[66], this conceptual tool is in need of revision.

The findings that are presented in this paper represent empirical contributions in two key respects. First, the nuanced qualitative data on the meaning of 'local food' which is held by consumers adds to the small body of

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research that already exists in this area[76,85]. Second, this study, in drawing a comparison between how consumers living in urban and rural areas understand 'local food', adds to scant existing work on this topic[69]. These empirical data could enjoy a practical application by actors or bodies who strive for goals of greater environmental care, social justice or economic stability in the wider food system. The consumer insights that this paper provides could be utilized by those who are interested in increasing the market share of 'local food'. In addition to representing a contribution to empirical and practical knowledge, the results presented in this paper are conceptually and theoretically novel. Debates on the socially constructed nature of scale and the concept of 'local food' are developed through an incorporation of issues of context: as social and spatial contexts change both among participants and within them, so too do understandings of 'local food'. In critically applying the concept of embeddedness to the consumer perspective, it contributes to previous debates on the nature of embeddedness[8,26,77] and its place within more mainstream food systems. This research adds to theoretical understandings of local food by presenting elements that are not covered by Eriksen's three-part local food taxonomy[41]. Extra dimensions that emerged and which could add to this framework were the findings of fluidity and plurality of understandings of local food, as well as the divide between urban and rural consumers. A final theoretical contribution is in respect of 'local trap' rhetoric which is critiqued from the perspective of its failure to recognize the complicated, contextualized and nuanced nature of understandings of 'local food'.

Considering the results of this paper, a number of avenues for future exploration can be recommended. First, this study could be replicated in another country to establish the importance of socially and spatially contextual factors. Such a study could also explore the extent to which specific findings, such as the differences between urban and rural dwellers, and the relevance of embeddedness, may be applicable on a wider geographic scale. Second, research on 'local food' could extend beyond consumer understandings to probe deeper into perceptions, values and behaviors, thus building on previous work in this area[87]. By providing a fuller image of the consumers and their relationship with local food, it could be possible to develop a conceptual model of local food consumer segments which would have both theoretical and practical applications.

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