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Research Paper

Trust in local food networks: The role of trust among tourism stakeholders and their impacts in purchasing decisions

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ABSTRACT

Trust and personal relationships are regarded as critical elements of local food systems. This study examines the role of trust and personal relationships among tourism stakeholders (restaurants and chefs, wholesale distributors, and local farmers and/or farmers' market vendors) in the purchase of local foods on a study conducted in Vancouver, Canada, and Christchurch, New Zealand. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with restaurants and chefs, farmers and/or farmers' market vendors, and wholesale distributors. The study identified that the trust dimension of relationships is very important for restaurants and chefs and wholesale distributors with respect to local food sourcing activities. The study also found social interaction and face-to-face relations that enable deep trust (due to the knowledge transfer involved) to be vital for restaurants and chefs and wholesale distributors in the purchasing of local food from farmers and/or farmers' market vendors, and other producers/suppliers. The major implications of the findings are that farmers need to develop trust-based relationships with their buyers in order to create better market access for local foods but that existing trust relationships can also act as a barrier to new entrants.

1. Introduction

Trust is an essential concept for understanding successful business, personal and organizational relationships (Palmatier, Dant, Grewal, & Evans, 2006). High levels of trust can help reduce conflict and risk in relationships and at the same time strengthen satisfaction and commitment in the service (Macintosh, 2009; Nielsen, 2011; Palmatier et al., 2006) and business-to-business (B2B) exchange (Anderson, Kaplar & Selö 2013; Chowdhury, 2012), including collaboration and knowledge transfer (e.g. Becerra, Lunnan, & Huemer, 2008).

Local food systems and alternative food networks (AFNs) allow consumers to have greater trust in their food (Allen, 2010). This is particularly in response to the perceived failings of the global industrial food system on economic, environmental, health, and social indicators of equity (Gössling & Hall, 2013; Martinez et al., 2010). In such systems, shortened food chains bring consumers closer to the origin of their food, resulting in a more direct interaction between producers and consumers (Feagan, Morris, & Krug, 2004; Hall, 2013; Hinrichs, Gulespie, & Feenstra, 2004; Jarosz, 2008; Renting, Marsden, & Banks, 2003), thereby potentially increasing trust in what consumers purchase

(Carolan, 2006; DuPuis & Gillon, 2009; Sage, 2003), especially with respect to the food environment and safety (DeLind & Howard, 2008).

In tourism and hospitality research, trust has mainly focused on community trust towards institutions (Nunkoo & Ramkissoon, 2011a, 2011b; Nunkoo, 2015; Nunkoo, Ramkissoon, & Gursoy, 2012), and customer trust towards tourist suppliers (Han & Hyun, 2015; Sparks & Browning, 2011). In the hospitality literature, consumer trust is considered key to building relationships with hotels (Lovell, 2009) and, to a limited extent, restaurants (Oh, 2002; Ok, Back, & Shanklin, 2005). Issues of trust have also been researched in relation to nature-based tourism (Zillifro & Morais, 2004), wine tourism (Hall, 2004), and airlines (Forgas, Moliner, Sánchez, & Palau, 2010). However, there is a much more limited body of research on trust in the B2B setting especially with respect to the food supply chain to restaurants, despite its recognition as a central construct to the development of successful relationships.

Despite growing recognition of the importance of local food networks for tourism and hospitality (Hall & Gössling, 2016), research on trust and personal relationships between restaurants, farmers and/or farmers' market vendors, and wholesale distributors' perspectives in sourcing local food products is extremely limited (Bloom & Hinrichs,

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2011; Duram & Cawley, 2012). This paper therefore fills this important knowledge gap by investigating trust and personal relationships among restaurants and chefs, farmers and/or farmers' market vendors, and wholesale distributors in Vancouver, Canada and Christchurch, New Zealand.

2. Literature review

2.1. Local food and sustainability

Local food systems are often regarded as a more sustainable alternative to globalized food systems (Gössling & Hall, 2013; Hall & Gössling, 2016; Ilbery & Maye, 2005a; Morgan, Marsden & Murdoch, 2006). A refocusing on local food systems is therefore regarded as a sustainable approach to reengaging people with where their food comes from while simultaneously reducing the distance food is transported and enhancing contributions to local economies, including via the hospitality sector (Hall & Gössling, 2013).

Major elements of local food systems include shorter distances between producers and consumers (Connell, Smithers, & Joseph, 2008); relatively small farm size and organic and low external input production methods; and a commitment to sustainable production, distribution and consumption (Ilbery & Maye, 2005a; Jarosz, 2008). The potential for better returns for small producers as a result of direct relationships to consumers has also been a major theme in the food tourism literature (Hall & Gössling, 2016). However, the exact nature of the relationships between local food systems and sustainability remain contested, given that growing locally is not necessarily more sustainable in terms of chemical, energy and water-intensive farming practices (Gössling & Hall, 2013; Hinrichs, 2003). Nevertheless, geographically focused local food systems are highly related to consumer interest in locally grown foods (Darby, Batte, Ernst, & Roe, 2008; Schneider & Francis, 2005).

Despite its importance, ambiguity also surrounds the definition of local food (Hall, 2013). The definition of local food is complex as are the implications for small scale producers (Ballute & Berger, 2014; Trivette, 2015). Most definitions are 'based on a general idea of where local food is coming from' (Dunne, Chambers, Giombolini, & Schlegel, 2011, p. 50; see also Hall & Gössling, 2016), although considerable emphasis is given to the relationship with jurisdictional spaces and borders (Schönhart, Penker, & Schmid, 2009), although these may range from the municipal to the country level or even beyond, and can vary for different food types.

Allen and Hinrichs (2007) argue that there are many benefits attributed to 'local' products, such as a better environment, healthier food, and greater social justice. However, they highlighted the conflicts that surrounded the meaning of local food definition and concluded that: 'the ambiguity about what local means...allows it to be about anything and, at the margin, perhaps very little at all' (p. 269). The notion of 'local' food is therefore fluid and relative, and depends upon context, with the concept varying among producers, suppliers, and consumers. Nevertheless, given the attention to it by food media, suppliers and consumers alike, it clearly remains important for tourism and hospitality providers, such as restaurants, as well as potentially maximizing positive economic relationships within communities (Hall & Gössling, 2016).

2.2. Local food and sustainable tourism

Local food is regarded as potentially enhancing sustainability in tourism (Green & Dougherty, 2009). Gössling and Hall (2013) introduced the concept of 'sustainable culinary systems' to explain the environmental, economic and social relations that develop in hospitality value chains and associated material flows of foodstuffs and the institutions that enable the system to operate. Using this approach, a number of different ways have been identified in which local food may

contribute to more sustainable regions. Purchasing within the local food system can generate a multiplier effect that will benefit the local economy (Hall & Gössling, 2016). This is especially the case when tourism presents opportunities for backward linkages and 'value-adding' (Telfer & Wall, 2000), and therefore also generates employment opportunities. For those locations that have capacity for food production, the use of local foods by hospitality and tourism operations can reinforce destination brands, assist in agricultural diversification and innovation, and create new export markets via the development of long-term relations with customers (Hall & Gössling, 2016; Mitchell & Hall, 2004).

Interest in local food by tourist can also serve to promote local agricultural practices and foodways (Hall, Mitchell, & Sharples, 2003). For example, Butler and Hall (1998, p. 225) stated 'sustainable tourism is ... as much about sustaining rural culture and identity as it is the physical environment'. Such an approach has become integral to the adoption of slow food practices by some restaurants and hotels (Hall, 2012; Nilsson, 2016), while also potential reducing the carbon footprint of the tourism and hospitality sector (Gössling, Garrod, Aall, Hille, & Peeters, 2011). Although any assessment of sustainability needs to consider all inputs into production and storage as well as transport (Fodness, 2016; Gössling & Hall, 2013), the significance attached by some actors to local food means that it remains an important element in restaurant provision.

2.3. Prior research on trust in relational exchange

2.3.1. Definitions of consumer trust

Definitions of trust are often contradictory and confusing (e.g. Jones, 2002), and difficult to operationalize (Simpson, 2007). Although trust can be broadly defined as a 'psychological state comprising the intention to accept vulnerability based upon positive expectations of the intentions or behavior of another' (Rousseau, Sitkin, Burt, & Camerer, 1988, p. 395), different disciplines have treated trust in significantly different ways (e.g. Das & Teng, 2004; Macintosh, 2009; McKnight & Chervany, 2001; Luo, 2002; Rotter, 1980; Sirdeshmukh, Singh, & Sabol, 2002; Stewart, 2003).

The majority of business literature focuses on trust in terms of either business-to-consumer (B2C) or business-to-business (B2B) relations. Differences between B2C and B2B in terms of trust correspond with the difference between interpersonal and inter-organizational trust and lie in the objective of the relationship, in which B2C focuses more on interpersonal trust and B2B focuses on inter-organizational trust. Zaheer, McEvily, and Perrone (1998) defined inter-organizational trust in terms of reliability, predictability, and fairness in exchange partner relations while interpersonal trust has the same elements, but with an individual as both the referent and origin of trust. Nevertheless, some literatures, including in relation to food and tourism (e.g. Hall, 2004), do not distinguish between these two types of trust and tend to use the term in mixed conditions. Similarly, Chowdhury (2012) concluded that the dimensions required to evaluate trust consist of benevolence and credibility, integrity, reliability, predictability, fairness, honesty, competence, goodwill, and constancy.

2.3.2. Trust in business relationships

In relationship-oriented marketing, trust is a central mediating variable of relationships and an instrument to develop and maintain mutually profitable relationships (Palmatier et al., 2006). Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001) also demonstrated trust as an important mediator between corporate activities and consumer loyalty. Frictions inherent in all relationships are easier to solve if positive trust has developed. Therefore, some authors see trust as an important coordination mechanism, which reduces uncertainty and enables collaboration (Emmett & Crocker, 2006), thereby potentially improving performance and providing competitive advantage (Sako, 2000).

Past research shows the importance of trust in buyer-seller

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