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The Shared Story: How Narratives Affect Consumers' Sense of Community and Support for CSAs

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The Shared Story: How Narratives Affect Consumers' Sense of Community and Support for CSAs

Abstract

As the demand for Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) grows, attracting and retaining consumers remains a challenge. Digital communication between farmers and consumers is recommended, but limited empirical research regarding optimal content strategies exist. Narrative persuasion, applied as a communication strategy, offers a promising opportunity to connect with CSA consumers. This study, an online between-subjects experiment, examined how consumers (n = 182) respond to narrative vs. non-narrative email messages from CSAs. Moreover, narrative perspective (first-person vs. third-person) was explored. Results indicated that consumers who read a short narrative were more likely to: feel positive emotion, a communal connection to the farm and support the farm than those who did not read a narrative. First-person perspective was viewed as less credible than third-person. Results emphasize the need for CSAs to digitally share their stories with consumers, in an effort to garner support for local farms. This study demonstrates an evidence-based approach to message development for CSAs.

Keywords

community supported agriculture; narrative persuasion; experiment; strategic communication

Cover Page Footnote/Acknowledgements

We confirm that this manuscript has not been previously published, is not currently under consideration by any other journal and that we did not receive support from any organization for the submitted work.

Introduction

A growing share of consumers want locally grown food and, as a result, there is an increasing demand for farmers to sell more products direct-to-consumer through Community Supported Agriculture (CSAs) (Hall, 2016; Martinez & Park, 2021; Sulistyowati et al., 2023; United States Department of Agriculture [USDA], 2024). CSAs, whereby growers and consumers mutually support a farm operation, are known to contribute to sustainable food production (Egli et al., 2023), increase the availability of healthy food options (Curtis et al., 2013; Oberholtzer, 2004; Ostrom, 2007; Perez et al., 2003; Vasquez et al., 2017) and among other benefits, create a culture in which consumers build closer relationships with farms (Seguin et al., 2020; Sulistyowati et al., 2023). However, despite the well-documented benefits of CSAs, scant research has examined how communication strategies influence potential consumers' attitudes and behaviors toward these programs.

As interest in CSAs continues to rise globally, marketing and promotion remain a major challenge for even the most experienced of farmers (Sulistyowati et al., 2023; USDA, 2024). Yet, limited evidence has addressed how farmers, especially those with smaller marketing budgets, specifically communicate with consumers or persuade them to join a CSA. The research that does exist, suggests that consumers may favor narratives that include personalized and emotive content (Goodwin et al., 2011; Hall, 2016; Yueh et al., 2020). However, to date, no identified empirical research has explored the specific message components and mechanisms that may increase consumers' intentions to support CSAs. Moreover, there is a need to further explore the use of first-person perspective within narrative communication, which has been shown to be persuasive in other contexts (Chen et al., 2024).

CSA programs have traditionally attracted middle-aged and higher-income consumers (Chen et al., 2019; Galt et al., 2019). However, as CSAs seek to expand and ensure long-term sustainability, it is essential to consider younger adults, an emerging demographic increasingly oriented toward sustainable food practices and poised to shape the future of alternative food systems (Halicka et al., 2025). This group remains largely underexplored in CSA-related research. Extensive research has examined member retention and satisfaction within CSA programs (Galt et al., 2019; Galt et al., 2017), yet far less attention has been given to prospective consumers and the future sustainability of CSA membership.

This study, an online experiment, fills this gap and provides evidence-based recommendations for CSAs, extending the theoretical implications of narrative persuasion. It also examines how variations in narrative perspective (e.g., first-person voice) shape consumer perceptions. As such, it contributes to scholarship in agricultural communication documenting how organic farms can communicate with their stakeholders, in particular, prospective consumers.

Literature Review

CSA Digital Communication Strategies

CSAs connect farmers and consumers (i.e., consumers) in a long-term partnership, in which they share the benefits and risks of food production (Egli et al., 2023; Sulistyowati et al., 2023, USDA, 2024). To foster the relationship between shareholders, farmers are encouraged to use Community Based Social Marketing (CBSM) such as emails and digital newsletters (McMurray et al., 2017; Prial, 2019) focused on personal contact (i.e., communication) (Hall, 2016; McKenzie-Mohr, 2011; Sharma, 2021). Through digital newsletters, CSAs are encouraged to share or present farm updates, recipes, and nutritional details (NC State Extension, 2025).

Prior research indicates this personalized, digital approach could be fruitful for agricultural communicators. In an online survey, Hall (2016) found that persuasively written messages, focused on personal motivations, such as food quality traits (e.g., fresh, organic, seasonal) and environmental concerns (e.g., desire to reduce packaging, pesticide-free food, sustainable practices) may persuade potential shareholders to join a CSA. More generally, Yueh et al. (2020) found that authentic, narrative-based messages with a distinctive protagonist (e.g., easily identifiable farmer) may positively influence agricultural consumer behaviors. Similarly, Goodwin et al. (2011) conducted focus groups, concluding that agricultural communicators should frame messages in more personal, rather than corporate terms. Similarly, Thomson et al. (2025) found that personal stories are an effective communication tool for agriculture extension programs. What is yet to be documented however, specifically in the context of CSAs, is whether consumers respond positively to such a narrative messaging strategy.

Narrative Persuasion

For consumers, weekly digital communications, which may contain narratives from the farmer's perspective, can offer a cognitive and affective connection to the farm (Hayden & Buck, 2012). There is evidence to suggest that narrative can create a sense of immersion that transports readers, allowing them to engage with images and anecdotes (Green & Appel, 2024; Green & Brock, 2000). A narrative, often interchangeably called a "story," is a series of connected events (Abbott, 2020; Onega & Landa, 2014) featuring the causally related actions and experiences of one or more main characters (Green & Appel, 2024). In the marketing sector, stories often lead people to be less critical and express more positivity toward a brand (Green & Appel, 2024; Escalas, 2004). Moreover, embedding a persuasive message within a story (e.g., "support small farms") is more compelling than presenting facts alone (Moyer-Gusé, 2008).

Evidence indicates that stories, whether they are read or told, yield stronger positive attitudes toward sustainable agriculture than purely lectures and fact sheets (Grace & Kaufman, 2013). Stories also hold a powerful influence over human decision-making and behavior (Freling et al. 2020). Unlike statistical data, which appeals to logic, stories engage emotions and create vivid, relatable experiences for individuals. In the context of agriculture, existing work has shown that narrative-based messages are also more efficient than messages using statistics at communicating risks (Morgan et al., 2002; Rickard et al., 2021).

Farm updates are an important element of a CSA's story. For example, Yueh et al. (2020) documented factors of a good agricultural story, outlining that a good agricultural story must be perceived as authentic, include a narrative and have a distinct protagonist. The authors explained that a good story ideally features a farmer with obvious identifiability. Such stories would appeal to emotions and feelings rather than reason. They should be easily disseminated and maintain the interest of the readers. Further supporting this notion, research from a field experiment confirmed that consumers prefer messages featuring components allowing consumers to directly relate to and visualize the farm than purely informative approaches (Cozzio et al., 2020).

Narrative perspective

Personal stories often use first-person pronouns, which place the reader more directly within the narrator's subjective experience. This perspective encourages identification and immersion, allowing audiences to share in the narrator's viewpoint (Chen, 2021). First-person pronouns can be singular (e.g., I, mine) or plural (e.g., we, ours). Prior research has documented the influence of pronouns on consumers' attitudes toward brands (Sela et al., 2012). Specifically, existing studies have shown that the use of the first-person has a positive effect on the perception

of emotional and behavioral engagement with a brand (Packard et al., 2018). A recent study also revealed that using first-person pronouns, both singular and plural, in collateral materials increased consumers' pro-environmental behavioral intentions (Yu et al., 2024). Such a communication strategy helps customers see a brand as more personable (Lee & Oh, 2021). Experimental reviews of the usage of a first-person pronoun even indicated that consumers exposed to such messaging reported higher purchasing intentions and purchasing behaviors (Packard et al., 2018).

Beyond pronoun usage, a first-person narrative perspective can heighten perceived authenticity and intimacy, positioning the narrator as a relatable, trustworthy communicator and, in some contexts, increase social presence and self-brand connection (Chen et al., 2024). Moreover, those who are engaged in a narrative will tend to focus on the story's characters and setting, rather than focusing on arguments (Green & Appel, 2024). Evidence suggests that stories, as compared to facts alone, help create empathy for the characters involved (Moyer-Gusé, 2008). The storyteller shapes the narrative, as a first-person account conveys a higher level of intimacy than a third-person narrative (Davis et al., 2004). This is critical, as a fundamental component of a CSA's success is a bond between farmers and members (Lin, 2022).

Cultivating positive emotions through narrative messages

Story-driven messages, as compared to informational messages, can emotionally engage audiences, transporting them into the narrative (Green & Appel, 2024; Green & Brock, 2000). These emotions tend to lead people toward desired actions (Green & Appel, 2024). For example, advertisers often create persuasive narratives that generate positive emotions (e.g., warm feelings, happiness) toward a product, in turn, leading consumers to buy it (Escalas et al., 2004). Positive emotions elicited by narrative transportation can also enhance brand evaluations (Escalas et al., 2004).

Transportation effects are shown to be stronger for commercial messages (as compared to non-commercial) and these messages are more likely to appeal to positive emotions (Laer et al., 2019). Extant research shows that when consumers are exposed to agricultural stories, they will have positive affective responses that ultimately trigger them to buy agricultural products (Yueh & Zheng, 2019). As a result, there are calls for strategic communicators to induce positive emotions when using storytelling in agricultural marketing (Yueh & Zheng, 2019).

Since narratives presented as text, rather than as video, tend to have higher emotional involvement (Green et al., 2008) especially as shown in agricultural contexts (Rickard et al., 2021), it is reasonable to consider a text-based email as an ecologically valid approach to simulating an appropriate medium.

Communal Relationships

Particularly in the context of CSAs, the feeling of being personally connected with farmers is important (Zepeda et al., 2013). Consumers want to know who grows their food and how it happens. By design, CSAs are intended to cultivate symbiotic relationships, in which the farmers and consumers reap mutual rewards and share challenges. Thus, as suggested by Aggarwal and Law (2005) the nature of this perceived relationship may influence how consumers cognitively evaluate farmers (i.e., the CSA brand). In a communal relationship, people are concerned for one another's well-being (e.g., friends, family) (Aggarwal, 2004; Clark & Mills, 2012). This is in contrast to an exchange relationship (more typical of strict business partners), which is more squarely focused on an economic exchange (Aggarwal, 2004). When the communal relationship is salient, consumers may feel more positively toward the brand and,

in turn, ensure a longer, more meaningful relationship (Aggarwal & Law, 2005; Kim et al., 2020). Through an experiment, Song et al. (2020) showed that this can be done by avoiding manipulative persuasive intent, instead highlighting non-sales related outcomes and promoting social benefits.

In practice, CSA marketing guides often recognize and support relationship building (Morgan et al., 2018). CSAs are encouraged to produce digital newsletters or emails in an effort to foster a more personal and continuous engagement with farms they may otherwise be physically removed from (Hayden & Buck, 2012). For example, the University of Tennessee's Institute of Agriculture encourages communal connections – noting that farmers who are unwilling to provide details about their farm and their production methods with customers would not be advised to start a CSA (Leffew, 2023). Since CSA member turnover is relatively high, it is recommended that weekly or biweekly communication is key to developing a long-term relationship – particularly to maintain member connectedness in the offseason (NC State Extension, 2025).

Organizational Credibility

A narrative's main character (e.g., farmer) serves as a source of information (Green & Appel, 2024). In science-based communication fields like agriculture and farming, audiences are seeking more from a source than just expertise – they also want warmth and sincerity in order to build trust (Fiske & Dupree, 2014). Scientific sources of information are often perceived as cold and narratives can make them seem warmer (Fiske & Dupree, 2014; Green & Appel, 2024). Moreover, research indicates that sources who share first-person accounts of scientific information, are more likely to be perceived as credible (Saffran et al., 2020). In sustainable agriculture, a core requirement for success is shared scientific and local knowledge among the community – which in practice, will only be accepted by non-experts if there is a degree of mutual trust with farmers (Lin, 2022; Pagliarino et al., 2020).

Credibility is a concept with multiple dimensions (e.g., trust, expertise). As established by Hovland et al. (1953), source credibility reflects the audience's attitude toward the communicator, which hinges on expertise and trustworthiness. Although no singular definition is universally accepted, scholars have expanded its conceptualization to fit digital settings (Kim & Brown, 2015). In the present study, credibility is explored as a multifaceted concept, articulated by Meyers (1988), which is centered on a source's "believability," encompassing specific qualities such as trust and accuracy. This measure of source credibility has been validated and tested in environmental contexts (McComas & Trumbo, 2021).

Existing research shows that higher source credibility influences positive message evaluations and therefore possible attitudinal changes and favorable behavioral intentions (Pornpitakpan, 2004). Additionally, highly credible sources have been found to be more persuasive than those perceived as less credible (Ohanian, 1990). For example, Lamm et al. (2016) demonstrated that message source (e.g., scientist vs. regulatory vs. farmer) significantly shaped how the public felt about agricultural water use, indicating that in an agricultural context "information source must be treated with paramount importance" (p. 129).

Consequently, in this study, the farmers, authors of the messages, would be expected to convey trust and believability through their knowledge of the crops, thus leading participants to rate their credibility positively. Additionally, previous research found that first-person narrative had positive effects on reputation (Park & Cameron, 2014).

Intentions to Support the Farm

Research shows that narratives can lead to long-term behavior change (Green & Appel, 2024; Oschatz & Marker, 2020). In particular, if a story includes a trustworthy main character, the more likely it is the audience will engage in a behavior promoted by the story's theme (Appel & Mara, 2013; Green & Appel, 2024). Although limited evidence exists in agricultural settings, prior research in narrative persuasion has shown how participants who can relate to the story characters may change their attitudes and behaviors (Green & Brock, 2000). A recent meta-analysis confirmed that narratives have a greater impact on actual behavior than non-narrative messages (Oschatz & Marker, 2020).

Moreover, there is evidence to suggest that a first-person narrative will positively influence behavior (Park & Cameron, 2014). For example, in a destination marketing context, Pachucki et al. (2022) demonstrated that first-person storytellers are more effective at positively influencing behavioral intentions (e.g., tourist visits) than third-person storytellers – even suggesting that farmers would be appropriate first-person storytellers. Recently, Chen et al. (2024) demonstrated that narrators live-streaming about agricultural products who use personal (i.e., in-group) cues (e.g., "our county" or "my fellow villagers") were more likely to spur positive intentions to support agriculture than less personal (i.e., out-group) narrators. This initial and limited inquiry, suggests that this technique should be replicated and tested in other agricultural contexts.

Purpose and Hypotheses

The experimental study aimed to understand the effectiveness of narratives distributed by CSAs via email. Specifically, the following hypotheses were posed:

> **H1a–d:** The presence of a narrative in an email distributed by a CSA will positively affect consumers' (a) emotions, (b) perceived communal relationship with the farm, (c) perceived credibility of the farm, and (d) intention to support the farm.
>
> **H2a–d.** First-person narratives will lead to (a) more positive emotions, (b) stronger perceived communal relationships with the farm, (c) higher perceived credibility of the farm, and (d) greater intentions to support the farm.

Method

Participants and Procedure

To test the hypotheses, a randomized experiment was conducted to fully control the independent message variables (i.e., narrative and non-narrative messages) and to determine whether these elements caused a change in the dependent variables (i.e., positive emotion, communal norms, credibility, and support for the farm), as is consistent with communication research standards (Keyton, 2023).

The online between-subjects experiment, approved by IRB, had three conditions: a first-person narrative, an organizational narrative and a non-narrative message. Participants (n = 182) were recruited from a large public southeastern research university. Although college students are not the typical CSA consumers, they were selected because they represent a large group of emerging consumers who stand at the forefront of the transition toward more sustainable food practices, with young women in particular identified as potential leaders in driving this change (Halicka et al., 2025). As is common in experimental communication research (Keyton, 2023) a convenience sample of students available at the time of data collection, drawn from

predominantly large lecture courses to provide a cross-sectional representation of the university population. Once recruited, they were directed to the study on Qualtrics, an online survey software platform. After indicating consent, they were randomly assigned to one of three conditions. All participants reviewed two emails from a fictional farm, in which the narrative or non-narrative was manipulated and then answered a self-report questionnaire comprising the dependent and demographic variables.

Stimuli

All versions of the stimuli followed a messaging model currently employed by a local organic farm in the southeastern United States. They appeared as email messages from a fictional farm called "*The Crop Collab*," and included a list of ingredients, a recipe (e.g., roasted kohlrabi), and a pickup location (which was a fictional "*Foods Market*"). The emails (with the exception of the non-narrative version) also included a paragraph describing the crop harvesting process, related farm projects and a thank you statement to the consumer. See Appendix for sample messages.

The first-person narratives were written using pronouns (e.g., we, you) and signed by farmers (e.g., Katie & Peter), whereas the organizational narratives were in third person, signed by the organization (*The Crop Collab*). For example, a line in the first-person narrative version that reads, "This Saturday we will be planting potatoes for our vegetable donation program" was replaced with, "This Saturday potatoes will be planted for the vegetable donation program" in the organizational version. Similarly, the final line that requested community support in the first-person version noted, "Please support your local farms, like ours," whereas the organizational version read, "Please support your local farms, like the Crop Collab." All messages were between 324-334 words in total length, with a narrative paragraph between 173-184 words in length.

The non-narrative condition did not include an introductory paragraph. Rather, it only included the list of ingredients, a recipe and a pickup location.

The stimuli were reviewed internally by the research team prior to data collection to ensure clarity and consistency with prior studies.

Measures

All variables were measured on 7-point scales with higher values indicating more positive perceptions (e.g., 1 = extremely unlikely; 7 = extremely likely). Items for each dependent variable were averaged together to create scales. See Table 1 for means, standard errors, and reliabilities.

Positive Emotion was measured using scales adapted from Dillard and Shen (2007). Five items addressed participants' happiness, such as: happy, joyful, and cheerful (e.g., 1 = none of this emotion; 7 = a great deal of this emotion).

Communal relationship norms were measured through seven items adapted from Aggarwal (2004). Sample items included, "The company cares for me" and "The company seems to like consumers like me."

Organizational credibility was measured through a five-item, bipolar scale adapted from Meyer (1988). Sample statement pairings included (a) can't be trusted/can be trusted and (b) is inaccurate/is accurate.

Behavioral intention to support the farm was measured through three items. Participants were asked how likely they were to: support the farm financially; recommend that friends support the farm financially; and subscribe to messages from farmers.

Participants were also asked a series of demographic questions related to age, gender and race/ethnicity, along with psychographics (e.g., Do you subscribe to a CSA? How healthy of an eater would you consider yourself? How often do you cook?).

Results

Participants were students between 18-39 years old (M = 20.09; SD = 2.03) with an overwhelming majority of women (68.5%). Self-reported races were White (77%), Black (9.3%), Asian (6.9%) or "Other" (6.9%). Most participants indicated that they did not subscribe to a CSA service (71.9%) – though 23.2% had considered it. Overwhelmingly, participants (94.1%) indicated they cooked at least once a week. On a 7-point scale, participants indicated that they were moderately healthy eaters (M = 4.46; SD = 1.25).

To ensure equivalency of conditions as it related to the dependent variables, ANOVAs were conducted prior to hypothesis testing. Data showed no differences between groups on cooking $F(2, 182) = 1.13$, $p = .33$ or healthy eating habits, $F(2, 182) = .18$, $p = .84$. A chi-square test also showed no difference of existing CSA subscription sign up rates between groups, X^2 (8, n = 182) = 8.94, $p = .347$.

Hypothesis testing

To test hypotheses H1a-d and H2a-d, ANOVAs were conducted using SPSS Statistics, version 31 (IBM, 2025). Descriptive statistics, including means, standard deviations, and internal reliability coefficients for the dependent variables, are provided in Table 1.

Table 1. Means, Standard Deviations and Reliabilities for the Dependent Variables

			Message Conditions		
	α	**All** *M* *(SD)*	**First-Person Narrative** (n = 64)	**Organizational Narrative** (n = 65)	**Non-Narrative** (n = 56)
Positive Emotion	.93	3.94 *(1.70)*	4.42[a] *(1.50)*	4.33[a] *(1.52)*	2.93[b] *(1.71)*
Communal Relationships	.87	4.26 *(1.18)*	4.52[a] *(1.27)*	4.40[a] *(1.18)*	3.85[b] (.95)
Organizational Credibility	.83	5.18 *(1.10)*	4.91[b] *(1.16)*	5.38[a] (1.05)	5.26[a] (1.04)
Intent to Support the Farm	.91	*3.19* *(1.79)*	*3.43*[a] *(1.87)*	3.38[a] *(1.78)*	2.69[b] *(1.65)*

Note. Within rows, means with different superscripts indicate significant differences. For positive emotion, differences are at $p < .001$. For the remaining variables, differences are at $p < .05$.

There were significant differences between groups on positive emotion, communal relationships, organizational credibility and intentions to support the farm. Those who read narrative messages (either first-person or organizational) reported significantly more positive

emotion (H1a), greater communal relationships with the organization (H1b) and greater intention to support the farm (H1d) than those who read non-narrative messages. Thus, H1a, H1b, and H1d were supported.

Contrary to the predictions of H2a, H2b and H2d, there were no significant differences between the first-person or organizational narrative conditions on positive emotion, communal relationships or intentions to support the farm.

The first-person narrative was viewed as significantly less credible than both the organizational narrative or non-narrative message. There were no significant differences on credibility between the organizational narrative and non-narrative message. Thus, H1c and H2c were not supported.

Discussion

The data presented here reveals that stories can help create a sense of shared connection and shape behavioral intentions of potential CSA consumers. Participants who read a story about a farm, as compared to those who did not, felt more positive, more connected to the farm and ultimately more likely to support it. Such findings are consistent with existing research in narrative persuasion, indicating that stories can evoke emotions, change behaviors and often have greater persuasive power than standalone facts (Green & Appel, 2024; Green & Brock, 2000; Moyer-Gusé, 2008).

Although the narratives had a strong effect, the storyteller's perspective was less consequential. Results indicated that a shift in narrative perspective (i.e., first-person or third person) did not heavily influence participants' emotion, connectedness, or behaviors. Perhaps in this case, it was due to participants' low involvement with CSAs (i.e., few were current subscribers). For example, Chen et al. (2024) demonstrated that first-person narratives in advertising elicit positive attitudes when involvement is high but is no different from a third-person narrative when involvement is low.

Contrary to expectations, the first-person perspective had the greatest and negative impact on organizational credibility. The data showed that first-person narratives were perceived as significantly less credible than third-person or non-narrative messages. This is surprising, as research suggests that farmers are perceived as "experts" in their field (Lamm et al. 2016) and would conceivably be the most credible about their own farm. However, it is possible that the first-person account made participants feel a closeness (Kim et al., 2020) that may have undermined competence, in turn affecting overall perceptions of credibility. As Chang et al. (2019) note, third-person narration conveys a sense of competence, whereas first-person demonstrates warmth. Moreover, it is possible the first-person account made the persuasive attempt more obvious than the organizational or non-narrative message, an effect which has been shown to lessen perceptions of credibility (Huang & Wang, 2020).

Practical implications

When writing digital messages, CSAs should consider the findings of this study. Consumers are motivated to join CSAs, in part, to support local farms and seek positive prosocial experiences (Chen et al., 2019; Rahmatika et al., 2024). The data shows that narrative messages cultivate positive feelings and help foster the communal relationship that future and current CSA members desire. Moreover, these results showed that a simple story – less than 200 words – can increase the likelihood that they will support the farm. Thus, beyond the cursory transactional information (e.g., pick up location; included ingredients) CSAs should include a story in messages sent to consumers.

When reaching out to potential members (or those with low involvement in the farm), an organizational narrative (i.e., third-person) may also be the most appropriate choice. Across the board, the data showed that these messages were consistently received favorably. These third-person stories, as compared to first-person stories, may even increase the perceived credibility of the farm. This is particularly important as information sources have been shown to affect CSA membership and renewal (Chen et al., 2019).

Beyond the present study, as the agricultural industry works to engage emerging consumer groups in sustainable food systems (Takagi et al., 2024), these results show that narrative communication can serve as an effective means of sharing and amplifying that story. This broader relevance suggests that similar narrative strategies may be applicable across other agricultural and sustainability communication contexts.

In sum, the evidence suggests that an organizational narrative should be part of the promotional mix if farmers want messages about their CSAs to take root.

Limitations and Future Research

Although the availability of CSA programs continues to grow nationwide, limited evidence exists on the best approaches to communicate about such opportunities. While this study answers some initial questions, it should be considered in light of limitations. The sample population was limited to young consumers, most of whom were not yet involved with CSAs. Although younger adults are more likely to participate in CSAs (Chen et al., 2019), future studies should explore how current members and/or older adults respond to narratives – particularly since subscriber retention is a common challenge.

Additionally, researchers should consider exploring CSA narratives in alternative formats. In this study, participants viewed text-only stories, and it is possible that a video format could alter outcomes. This might allow for an examination of whether modality interacts with narrative perspective, as visual and auditory cues may further affect audience engagement and identification, extending understanding of narrative persuasion processes among various audiences. Moreover, other narratives that emphasize areas of motivation for typical CSA members (e.g., sustainable agriculture), include other barriers (e.g., price point) and varying distribution schedules (e.g., weekly, biweekly, monthly) could be tested.

Conclusion

Despite its growing popularity, CSA membership is relatively low across the U.S. and factors that influence consumer behavior are underexplored. Survey research shows that connectedness is a strong motivating factor for joining a CSA – yet few studies have experimented with how to communicate and cultivate a direct relationship between farm/er and consumer. This study provides empirical evidence that a simple story is a valuable strategic messaging tool. Including a persuasive narrative in an email to consumers can increase positive emotions, heighten feelings of community, and increase support for the farm. Ultimately, a shared story can lead to shared interest in the success of a CSA.

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Appendix A: Sample First-Person Narrative Shown to Participants

The next 7 days are looking really promising for planting! We got only a little rain a couple days ago and the fields are already drying out nicely. This Saturday we will be planting potatoes for our vegetable donation program and are looking for volunteers. If you're interested, reply to this email and we'll give you the details. Next week we'll plant the rest with our crew as well as hopefully carrots, beets and cilantro. After that our big planting push will be in mid March (hopefully after the last frost!) when we'll be planting the bulk of our spring crops. These include tomatoes, eggplant, peppers, basil, beans, squash, and more. Up until then we will be doing field prep and continue harvesting winter veggies. Right now the farm is the smallest it will be the entire season, but that is very temporary. Come April and the place will be filled to the brim with food!

Thanks for eating your veggies! We can’t do this without you. Please support your local farms, like ours.

Best,
Katie & Peter
The Crop Collab

Appendix B: Sample Organizational Narrative Shown to Participants

The next 7 days are promising for planting! There was only a little rain a couple days ago and the fields are already drying out nicely. This Saturday potatoes will be planted for the vegetable donation program and volunteers are needed. If you're interested, reply to this email and you will receive the details. Next week planting will continue - hopefully carrots, beets and cilantro. After that the big planting push will be in mid March (after the last frost!) when the bulk of spring crops will be planted. These include tomatoes, eggplant, peppers, basil, beans, squash, and more. Up until then field prep will go on and the harvesting of winter veggies will continue. Right now the farm is the smallest it will be the entire season, but that is very temporary. April is traditionally a month with an abundance of food and the place will be filled to the brim with food!

Thanks for eating your veggies! Please support your local farms, like the Crop Collab.

Best,
The Crop Collab