

# The Impact of Local: Exploring Availability and Location on Food Buying Decisions

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## Abstract

*The term “local food” is a buzzword in the food industry for consumers. However, when consumers make food-purchasing decisions, do they look for the specific growing locations and consider the seasonality of the product? In this study, researchers used focus groups to determine the impact growing location and months of availability have on consumers’ purchasing decisions in order to identify effective communication strategies when communicating about local food. The theoretical framework of framing and cognitive dissonance informed this study. The findings from this research indicated consumers defined local food as grown in a certain area, state, or region. Additionally, results indicated consumers make food-buying decisions based on personal preference, versatility, health benefits, preparation, and seasonal cooking. Overall, consumers’ decisions to buy produce were not impacted by growing season, but rather by their preference for a specific product. Participants noted most produce is available year round nationally. The researchers recommend communicators focus on developing message strategies framed toward the purchasing attributes identified by the participants instead of growing location and availability. Future research should continue to examine the impact of different frames on consumer food-purchasing decisions and how consumers perceive specific message frames.*

## Key Words

Local food, buying decisions, qualitative, focus groups, framing, cognitive dissonance

## Introduction and Literature Review

Local food has become one of the largest food purchasing trends in the 21st century (Zepeda & Nie, 2011) and generates more than \$8.3 billion for the Florida economy (Hodges & Stevens, 2013). Previous research has shown the amount and popularity of farmers’ markets as well as other local food venues have grown substantially during the past decade (Brown & Miller, 2008). Additionally, in a 2010 national study, 82% of consumers reported they had previously purchased local food (Onozaka, Nurse, & McFadden, 2010). Despite the billions of annual revenue from locally grown food as well as the large percentage of consumers purchasing locally grown food, consumers still find limitations to buying local food in Florida, such as lack of availability or limited selection of local foods, inconvenience, and seasonal availability (Hodges & Stevens, 2013). To better promote local food products to consumers, communicators must understand what influences a consumer’s decision to purchase local food. After understanding what influences a consumer’s decision, communicators can use this information to frame messages to encourage the purchase of local food (Lundy, 2006).

In this study, previous literature was examined to explore how the definition of local food, the

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attributes of food, and the seasonality and months of availability impacted consumers' decisions to purchase local products. Previous literature has explained how consumers are influenced by their previous knowledge and expectations of a product (Lindsey-Mullikin, 2003), such as varying definitions of local food. Although a generally accepted definition of local food does not exist (Martinez et al., 2010), the United States Department of Agriculture has defined local food as a product that has traveled less than 400 miles from its origin or within the state it is produced (Johnson, Aussenberg, & Cowen, 2013; Martinez et al., 2010). Additionally, consumers have differing definitions of local food (Onozaka et al., 2010). Some consumers have defined local food as being within a county, neighboring counties, or state (Zepeda & Li, 2006). Onozaka et al. (2010) found national survey respondents defined local as being within a 50-mile radius, while a 300-mile radius was considered regional. In a study by Hodges and Stevens (2013), most respondents viewed local food as being grown within a 100-mile radius of home, in the state, or in a bordering state. Consumers have suggested other definitions of local food, such as grown in their own city or town, country, and U.S. region (Hodges & Stevens, 2013).

Previous research has identified functional and psychological benefits linked to local food attributes that have an impact on food purchasing (Nie & Zepeda, 2011). Benefits to consumers included functional attributes, such as clean, safe, and healthy, as well as attributes that appealed to consumers' psychological emotions, such as environmental impact, preserving the farmland, and social fairness (Keeling-Bond, Thilmany, & Bond, 2009; Onozaka et al., 2004). Keeling-Bond et al. (2009) explored the link between consumer demand and food safety practices and found consumers purchased local food because they perceived it to be safe, clean, fresh, and of high quality (Keeling-Bond et al., 2009). Additionally, Onozaka et al. (2004) found consumers intended to make decisions to support their surrounding environments, or make "civic and society-focused decisions," and considered factors such as supporting the local economy, supporting farmers, and maintaining local farmland when purchasing produce (p. 2). However, in a study ranking functional produce attributes, taste/visual appeal, healthfulness and nutrition, good value, and convenience were ranked higher than the psychological attributes, such as environmental impact, preserving the farmland, and social fairness (Costanigro, McFadden, Kroll, & Nurse, 2011). Therefore, understanding what attributes influence consumers' decisions to purchase food can help communicators understand the decision-making process and frame specific messages to encourage the purchase of food (Abrams & Meyers, 2009).

A consumer's ability to buy local ultimately is influenced by a product's seasonality or the months of availability. If the product is not being grown in a specific area during a particular season, the consumer cannot buy the product locally. The individual then must choose to buy a similar non-local product or purchase a different product. Previously, seasonality has not been found to influence a consumer to purchase a product, and instead, the individual looks for similar product attributes in non-local foods (Arnold et al., 1983; Timmons, Wang, & Lass, 2008). This study's purpose was to determine what type of local food information impacts consumers and how communicators can use this information in messages to encourage the purchase of local food.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Cognitive Dissonance**

To develop messages to increase the purchasing of local food, the communicator needs to understand the thought process of the consumer. The theory of cognitive dissonance was developed by Leon

Festinger (1962) to describe the thought process, which occurs when an individual has two conflicting thoughts. Festinger (1962) stated people have a need for cognitive consistency and balance. When individuals are presented with a decision inconsistent with their beliefs or values, dissonance occurs. Hunt (2004) explains, “psychological discomfort motivates people to resolve inconsistency and restore cognitive balance” by making a decision to revert to their original thoughts (p. 147).

During the product selection and purchasing process, consumers often have to choose one product over another; thus, creating a cognitive conflict as they choose not to purchase alternative products (Kaish, 1967). Cognitive dissonance occurs when individuals choose to make a decision with negative attributes or not make a decision with positive attributes (Aronson, 1969). When purchasing local food, cognitive dissonance can occur when a consumer makes a decision to buy or not buy local food.

Festinger’s (1962) theory of cognitive dissonance provides a framework to describe the situation when consumer are presented with a product inconsistent with their existing knowledge, behavior, attitudes, or values. Kaish (1967) stated, “cognitive dissonance is the result of a purchaser’s ability to perceive product qualities that suggest that the good he has bought may be inappropriate to his needs” (p. 30).

Lindsey-Mullikin (2003) described Festinger’s (1962) theory in relation to consumers’ reaction to unmet price expectations, such as a higher food price. When consumers experience an unexpected price expectation, they adapt to seeking agreeable information, changing their attitude, or trivializing (Lindsey-Mullikin, 2003; Gbadamosi, 2009). According to Lindsey-Mullikin (2003), “consumers will tend to favor information that is consistent with their prior beliefs” and will reduce dissonance by seeking alternative products, either at different locations or by choosing a different product (p. 141). Consumers may reduce dissonance through attitude reduction or cognitive change (Lindsey-Mullikin, 2003). By changing their attitudes toward a product, consumers re-evaluate their previous ideas of price expectations (Lindsey-Mullikin, 2003). Trivialization may occur when the “dissonant relationship is reduced” (Lindsey-Mullikin, 2003, p. 142). Trivialization occurs when the product causing the dissonance becomes insignificant by the consumer and when the consumer purchases the product (Lindsey-Mullikin, 2003). This example shows how consumers experience dissonance when introduced to new products or new prices (Gbadamosi, 2009). In Hjelmars’ (2010) study, interview participants tended to purchase a specific produce item when it was convenient. This study showed how participants were interested in a specific produce item; however, the participants were unlikely to seek the product unless it was convenient (Hjelmars, 2011). The resolution of cognitive dissonance does not suggest the correct decision has been made; but instead, suggests ways consumers can come to terms with their decisions and internal conflict (Goodwin, 2010).

### **Framing**

After a communicator understands a consumer’s thought process when deciding whether or not to purchase a local food, a communicator can develop messages targeted toward influencing the consumer to buy a local product. A consumer’s interpretation of messages can be explained through framing (Goodwin, Chiarelli, & Irani, 2011). Entman (1993) wrote, “to frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, casual interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation” (p. 52). As a communicator sets a frame, readers, viewers, or listeners interpret this information and discuss the information publicly (Scheufele, 1999). In other words, communicators summarize the main aspects of a specific topic to “define causes, make moral judgments and sug-

gest remedies” (McQuail, 2012, p. 380), while consumers engage in discussions based on the framed idea, or a set of shared assumptions, and share the information presented by the frame (Hertog & McLeod, 2001).

A framed message will impact how an individual views a specific topic or idea (McQuail, 2012). A previous study evaluated how the media framed organic food to identify salience in consumer conversations (Meyers & Abrams, 2010). Meyers and Abrams (2010) found the media placed emphasis on ethical and moral reasons to purchase organic foods and placed limited emphasis on the scientific evidence of quality, safety, and nutrition. The results of this study showed the media framed buying organic food for ethical and moral reasons because it “presented organic food as a better food choice” (Meyers & Abrams, 2010, p. 27). By providing the consumer with framed information about specific attributes, the framed information will lead the individual to believing organic food is the better choice (Meyers & Abrams, 2010).

### **Purpose and Objectives**

The purpose of this study was to understand consumers’ buying behavior when purchasing local produce in order to identify effective communication strategies when communicating about local food. The following research objectives guided this study:

1. To determine the participants’ definition of local food.
2. To determine what affects consumers’ decisions to buy local produce.
3. To determine if consumer decision-making is influenced when given the months of availability or growing locations of Florida-grown food.

### **Methods**

To fulfill the purpose of understanding consumers’ buying behavior when purchasing local produce, qualitative focus group methodology was used. Qualitative research is necessary to understand the entirety of a social phenomenon (Ary, Jacobs, & Sorenson, 2010). A focus group is a specialized form of qualitative research used to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon through group interaction and discussion (Morgan, 1997). Kitzinger (1995) described a focus group as a group interaction allowing for participants to discuss, comment, and exchange ideas about specific questions and topics. Researchers are able to record and compile these discussions as qualitative data. This type of method allows researchers to gather rich data on how and why participants think the way they do about a particular topic based on the conversations that arise in the group discussion (Ary et al., 2010).

To generate group discussion, Kreuger (1994) suggested recruiting between seven and 10 participants and holding a minimum of three focus groups. A total of 93 individuals participated in these focus groups, with eight to 12 participants in each group. Participants were recruited based on their proximity to one of the focus group locations, interest in local food, and representative demographics of Floridians. An external marketing firm was used to select and recruit participants.

For this study, researchers conducted five sets of two (10 total) focus groups at different locations around the state; thus, achieving environmental triangulation (Guion, Diehl, & McDonald, 2009). The five geographic locations were chosen based on the type of crops grown in each location in the state of Florida. Since the crops grown vary across the state, the different focus group locations showed a representation of available local food in Florida. Following Kreuger’s (1994) instructions, two focus groups were held in each location. Each focus group was approximately two hours long



and directed by the same moderator. An assistant moderator and two note takers accompanied the moderator at each of the focus groups. The focus groups were audio recorded and then transcribed by an external researcher.

A moderator's guide was used to organize and guide the focus group discussion based on Kreuger's (1994) recommendations. A panel of experts reviewed the finalized instrument for face and content validity. To fulfill the research objectives, questions were developed based on determining (1) the participants' definition of local food (2) what affects consumers' decisions to buy local produce, and (3) if consumers decision-making was influenced when given the months of availability or growing locations of Florida-grown food. To identify what local meant for participants in this study, the term local food was not defined for the consumer, and the consumer determined his or her own definition of local. To answer the second and third objectives, participants were asked to participate in two scenarios. For the first scenario, each participant was given 20 flashcards. The flashcards were developed by the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services to promote and highlight some of the state's prominent local products. Each flashcard had a fruit or vegetable on it that was grown in Florida. In addition to the fruit or vegetable, the card identified the primary growing location and the months of availability. Participants were asked to pretend when they left the focus group, they were going to the grocery store to buy five of the 20 fruits or vegetables to take home and eat during the month of March. Participants then were asked to discuss their decisions. After the first scenario, the participants were asked to repeat the same steps, but they were asked to pretend they were going shopping in the middle of October. Participants were asked again to discuss their decisions.

The focus groups included participant observation and clarification (Kreuger, 1994). At the end of each focus group, member checking was used as a form of validation. The conversation was summarized and the participants were asked to confirm and verify the summary (Kreuger, 2002). Data were analyzed using a thematic analysis. The lead researcher, a graduate student specializing in agricultural communications, analyzed the data for themes. An audit trail detailing the data analysis was used, thus increasing confirmability and dependability. A co-researcher confirmed the final themes (Creswell, 2007).

A total of 93 adults participated in the focus groups. The participants consisted of 37 males and 56 females, ranging in age from 21 to 58. The participants represented Caucasian, African American, Hispanic, and other races and ethnicities. Additionally, participants' education ranged from high school to graduate or professional degrees. The participants held various occupations, such as health-care, education, business, government, construction, homemaker, food service, and retired.

## Results

### **Research Objective 1: To determine the participants' definition of local food.**

The participants were asked to define what local food meant to them. When asked, the participants indicated the four themes of (1) grown in a certain area, (2) statewide, (3) regionally, and (4) nationwide.

**Grown in a certain location.** In this theme, the majority of participants discussed how local food meant grown in a certain location within the state. Participants' discussed local food as being grown locally, grown in the area, or natively grown. In Gainesville, a participant explained, "grown in the area." Another participant in Orlando offered "natively grown" as a definition of local food. Participants in West Palm Beach discussed specific counties as a certain location, "About a three-county area." A Sarasota participant explained: "I think to be more specific to me. Basically, local to me is in

my area of Sarasota County.” Local food was within a two-hour radius for another West Palm Beach participant who said, “food grown or raised in an hour or two at most away.” A participant in Sarasota discussed, “I think anything close by driving distance, local to my house.”

**Grown within the state.** Throughout the focus group discussion, participants indicated local meant food grown within a state. This theme was secondary to the theme detailing certain locations. A participant in Sarasota discussed how local food was selecting something grown statewide because it can be transported quickly to their location: “[Local] means, I would say, Florida. You can get it here pretty quick.” In West Palm Beach, a participant discussed he/she would consider local being Florida:

I usually think local is [the] State of Florida because I want to get my strawberries from Plant City. Those are the best ones. Down here in the sandy soil they aren’t as good. If you can get your produce from Belle Glade, it’s even better because it’s grown in muck, it’s richer.

**Grown within a region.** Across the focus group discussion, participants suggested local food could mean food grown in a specific region of the United States. A Tallahassee participant discussed local food could come from Florida and the surrounding states. This participant said, “If you bought fruits and vegetables and meats anywhere in the state of Florida, [they] would really be considered local, or even a little bit into Georgia and Alabama, I would consider local.” A participant in Gainesville suggested the Southeast as a region where local food could be grown, “Grown in the Southeast, based on how far things can travel and how we move things around.”

**Grown within the nation.** A small number of participants referred to local food as being grown within the nation. Participants suggested they preferred to buy food grown in the U.S. as opposed to food grown outside of the country. A participant from Orlando indicated he/she would rather buy food grown in the United States. This participant said: “I try not to buy out of the country, for whatever reason. I don’t know, I feel like buying out of the country, some farmer in Idaho is going broke because I am buying my grapes from [another country].” In Tallahassee, food grown nationwide was more preferred than internationally grown food by a participant who said, “Something that’s grown in the U.S. I would privilege over something that’s grown in South America.”

### **Research Objective 2: To determine what affects a consumers’ decision to buy local produce.**

After participants made their selection of five fruits or vegetables to buy, they discussed the reasons leading them to their selections. Five themes emerged as reasons for selecting certain fruits and vegetables, including (1) personal preference, (2) versatility, (3) health benefits, (4) preparation, and (5) seasonality.

**Personal preference.** Personal preference was the most dominant theme discussed by participants in objective 2. When the focus group participants discussed why they selected specific foods, the majority of participants indicated they selected foods liked by themselves or their families. A Gainesville participant discussed personal preference was the main motivation for buying food; he/she said: “I would say I’m a really picky eater. So, I definitely chose items that I liked.” In Tallahassee, a participant selected foods liked by family members. The participant said, “I did blueberries, strawberries, and oranges as my kids eat them like crazy, and then watermelon and sweet corn because I know we are going to be cooking out this weekend.”

**Preparation.** For this dominant theme, participants indicated they took preparation of the food

into consideration when making their selections. Participants tended to pick foods that did not require complex preparation and were easy to prepare. They also did not select food they did not know how to prepare. Local food selections were based on easy to prepare foods for this Sarasota participant who said, “Yeah, everything I chose is something that takes minutes to prepare.” Another participant in Gainesville explained preparation time was a motivating factor when choosing the local food cards. The participant said, “The more time it takes to prepare something the less likely somebody is going to eat it.” Local food selections were based on foods a Tallahassee participant knew how to eat. The participant said: “I was just asking about the star fruit. How do you eat this stuff? I don’t know how to eat that so I’m not gonna buy it.”

**Versatility.** Throughout the discussion, participants suggested foods were selected based on versatility. While choosing foods to be used for a variety of purposes was important to participants, it was secondary to their primary personal preference. Participants explained foods with versatility could be used in a variety of dishes or meals. One participant in Tallahassee chose to select produce used in many meals throughout the week. The participant said:

Okay, I chose watermelon and cantaloupe and strawberries, because we eat a lot of fruit and you can eat them by themselves or you can cut them up and have them as a salad. You can have them for breakfast, lunch, or dinner; it really doesn’t matter. They’re all good. ... [These are] very versatile foods.

A participant in West Palm Beach selected five local food cards based on foods that could be used in a variety of meals. The participant said:

I like the variation of everything I chose. You can use blueberries to put in oatmeal and you can use blueberries in a great salad. You can cook tomatoes, you can eat them fresh, and they are delicious. They look nice on a plate and add a little color.

**Health benefits.** Throughout research objective two, a couple of participants in each of the focus groups indicated health benefits as a reason for selecting certain foods. A participant in Gainesville explained how the vitamin and nutrient content influenced which foods they selected. This participant said: “I chose the greens because of the vitamins, the iron that you can get ... I chose the tangerines because of the vitamins. They have Vitamin C, and they help keep your immune system up.” Another participant in Gainesville primarily selected foods fitting nutritional requirements and standards. The participant said: “I chose carrots, peppers, tomato, greens, and strawberries. The first thing I was looking at was whether they fit our nutritional requirements for nutritional standards.”

**Seasonal Cooking.** After the participants thought about the five fruits or vegetables the participants would go and buy at the grocery store after the focus group, the participants were asked to make five new selections for the month of October. Several participants changed their selections because their food preferences changed in the autumn months. Their selections included more vegetables to be used by themselves or in soups and casseroles. While seasonal cooking was a dominant theme for the October decision, the idea of selecting products for seasonal cooking was not emphasized in the discussion surrounding the March scenario. A change in season meant a change in cooking styles for a Gainesville participant, who said:

I switched up some things. I added citrus because I buy it normally in the fall because of it be-

ing in season. Normally in the fall, I am moving from cabbage to greens and I normally start doing greens then in preparation for holiday meals. I don't do them [greens] all year round.

Another participant discussed selecting vegetables for soup when they said, "I picked all vegetables because I was thinking of making soups and stuff like that because it's getting closer to winter. You want more comfort food and that's right to me."

**Research objective 3: To determine if consumer decision-making is influenced when given the months of availability or growing locations of Florida-grown food.**

To fulfill research objective three, focus group participants were asked to discuss how the months of availability and the growing location impacted the five fruits or vegetables they selected in both scenarios. Participants indicated the following themes for objective three: (1) months of availability and growing location has no impact on decision, (2) participants looked at the months of availability or growing location, (3) months of availability and growing location were secondary to their primary preference, and (4) the foods would still be available in the grocery store even if the card indicated foods were not available. In addition, participants discussed how the information on the card was interesting and informative.

**No impact on decision.** In research objective three, the majority of participants indicated the month's availability and the growing locations did not make an impact on food-buying decisions. This dominant theme was evident when many of the participants responded by saying, "No" or "Not at all."

**Looked at months of availability and growing location.** While no impact on decision was the most dominant theme in the third objective, participants discussed looking at the months of availability and growing location. Most participants looked at both the months of availability and the growing location, but they indicated this information did not impact their decisions. Further discussion of participants' consideration of months of availability and growing location is below.

**Months of availability and growing location did not make an impact.** A few participants stated they did look at the months of availability and the growing location, but it did not impact their decision. In Gainesville, a participant discussed looking at the months of availability, but it did not affect his/her selection, "I noticed them [months of availability], but it did not affect my choice." In West Palm Beach, a participant discussed only looking at the growing location because food location was the topic of the focus group. The participant said: "I looked at it because we have been talking about it all day. But, otherwise I probably wouldn't have looked as hard." Several participants discussed looking at the growing location on the card but not considering the information in their decisions. One participant said, "I did [look at the growing location], but it didn't factor into my decision."

Participants discussed foods are always available in the grocery store. A Gainesville participant said: "You can find watermelon in January if you want to. [agreement heard] You know, you go to Publix and you can find all this stuff. To me, the availability didn't really weigh in on it [decisions]." In Orlando, a participant discussed different growing locations that allowed foods to be available all year round. This participant said:

Someone, somewhere is growing it and you can get it. It might not be quite as good, you get the Zellwood corn and you can't beat that. But, somebody in Georgia is gonna be growing corn. You know it's always available.



In Orlando, a participant explained how he/she picked foods based on their preferences, not based on their location: “I picked what I eat. These are foods that I’m gonna want to eat. I didn’t look at all at when they were grown or where they were grown.”

***Months of availability were considered as a factor when selecting local foods.*** In this secondary theme, the months of availability were considered in a few of the participants’ decision to select a local food. In West Palm Beach, a participant said, “I mean, I definitely looked to see that they are available now.” In Tallahassee, two participants discussed looking at the months of availability when selecting their foods. The first participant said, “I checked to make sure they were available.” Another participant agreed and said, “Yeah, I did the same thing.”

Some participants discussed making changes in their food selections in the October scenario because something they had previously picked was not available in October. In Gainesville, the months of availability caused a participant to change his/her selection: “I switched my cantaloupe to sweet corn because cantaloupe is not available in October. Yes, you can get things year round, but it is usually shipped from someplace else.” In West Palm Beach, a participant put back an item due to the months of availability. The participant said, “This time around it was a little different because I literally looked at the months to see what was available. I put my cantaloupe back.”

**Secondary to primary preference.** While some participants indicated they looked at the growing location and months of availability of the local foods they selected, others discussed growing location and months of availability were secondary to their preferences. This theme was apparent in each of the focus groups. In Orlando, the purchasing of local food was a preference of a participant but not a primary concern. This participant said: “I had sweet corn and celery, tangerines, strawberries, and blueberries. This is stuff that I like. I noticed that they are all available now and I like things that are available here, but that wasn’t my primary concern.” Personal preferences came before the growing location and months of availability for a West Palm Beach participant, who said, “I picked all of mine and then looked at everything else, when they were available, how they were grown.” A participant in Tallahassee discussed prioritizing food preferences even though the months of availability and growing location were apparent on the card. This participant said:

I guess for me, I prioritize the food item first, and then I probably would have looked at the months. Even though the [information] was there, obviously taking up a big portion of the card, the food stood out first for me, before the map or the months of availability.

**Interesting information.** Throughout the focus groups, a few participants discussed how the information about growing locations and availability was interesting and informative. They indicated they enjoyed learning where a certain fruit or vegetable was grown. Growing location was found interesting by a participant in Orlando; however, it did not impact his/her decision to buy a product. This participant said, “It was kind of interesting to see what was [grown] where, but it didn’t determine whether or not I buy it.” Other participants enjoyed learning about where their food comes from. In West Palm Beach, a participant said, “This is very informational. I like to see which counties [the food comes from].”

## Conclusions/Discussions

To develop communication strategies to increase consumers’ purchases of local food, this study sought to understand how “local food” information impacts a consumer’s buying decisions. These

findings are consistent with previous literature suggesting participants made local food-buying decisions based on their previous knowledge and definitions, personal preferences, versatility of the produce, health benefits, the ease of preparation, and the time of year (Keeling-Bond, Thilmany, & Bond, 2009; Nie & Zepeda, 2011; Onozaka et al., 2004).

In objective one, participants indicated local meant a variety of different definitions, including grown in a certain area, grown within the state, grown within a U.S. region, and grown in the United States. The participants' perceptions of locally grown food was consistent with the previous literature that reveals varying definitions of local food and consumers defining local food as coming from within a county, state, or bordering state (Martinez et al., 2010; Onozaka et al., 2010).

The second objective indicated the types of attributes consumers look for in local food. Emergent themes included personal preference, versatility, health benefits, ease of preparation, and use in seasonal cooking. From this objective and the previous literature, researchers were able to identify the functional and psychological benefits consumers look for in local food (Nie & Zepeda, 2011; Keeling-Bond, Keeling-Bond et al., 2009; Onozaka et al., 2004). The functional benefits include personal preference, versatility, and health benefits, whereas the psychological benefits included ease of preparation and use of seasonal cooking. The months of availability and growing location could also be considered a psychological benefit (Keeling-Bond et al., 2009; Onozaka et al., 2004) as participants looked at the information and found it interesting; some even wanted to support the local farmer, but they also found the information to be secondary to their primary preferences. This finding is consistent with the previous literature suggesting the psychological benefits were secondary to the functional benefits of a product (Keeling-Bond et al., 2009; Onozaka et al., 2004).

Additionally, the findings of objective two suggest the participants had pre-existing expectations their produce selections should match their preferences, their need for versatility in produce, and their need for easy preparation. Pre-existing expectations have been previously shown to influence consumer perceptions of a product (Lindsey-Mullikin, 2003). In addition, pre-existing knowledge, such as the health benefits of produce, have been shown to influence consumer perceptions of a product (Keeling-Bond et al., 2009; Lindsey-Mullikin, 2003; Onozaka et al., 2004). By understanding what attributes impact a decision, communicators can frame specific messages (Abrams & Meyers, 2009) to cater products toward the local attributes favored by consumers.

The third research objective explored the effect of frames presented to the participants, in the form of growing location and months of availability, about the Florida-grown food from which they could select. The frames were designed to help the participants make judgments about their selections (McQuail, 2012). Similarly to previous studies, it appears the framed information of growing location and months of availability did not influence participants to select certain products as the participants thought about the product (Arnold et al., 1983; Timmons, Wang, & Lass, 2008), underwent cognitive dissonance, and selected products that were not in season or not grown in their immediate area (Festinger, 1962). Additionally, the results from objective one suggest many participants defined local food as being within the state, region, or nation. In the scenarios given to participants, all of the food options were grown within the state. Therefore, growing location may not have had an influence on their decisions as it likely aligned with their broad and, perhaps, varying definition of local food. Months of availability also may have had limited impact on buying decisions because in the participants' reality they can buy these foods from the grocery store at anytime during the year. These results are similar to previous literature showing consumers often disregard the growing location and the months of availability and instead looked for similar attributes in non-local foods (Arnold et al., 1983; Timmons, Wang, & Lass, 2008). However, it is important to remember the results of this

study are limited to the participants who participated in this study and the researchers' interpretation of their discussion. The results may have been different outside of the focus group setting or among alternative participants.

### **Recommendations and Implications**

The findings of the research objectives indicate information about the months of availability and the growing location may not be as important to consumers' food-buying decisions as previously thought (Brown & Miller, 2008). These findings also gave insight to what consumers value as local and their preference for local food to be from within a specific area or statewide. The findings also suggested some participants are satisfied with food being grown within a specific region or the nation.

Agricultural communicators can use these results to develop promotional and communication materials targeted toward consumers' preferred food attributes (Meyers & Abrams, 2010) to promote local food from Florida. Since the results of this study indicate consumers do not primarily take growing location and months of availability into consideration, communicators should not use this type of information as a main message in promotional materials of Florida-grown food. Instead, communicators should focus on designing promotional materials illustrating the preferred attributes, such as the importance of healthy eating, versatility, and consumer preference for a particular local product. If local food information is framed to meet one or more consumer preference attributes, such as health benefits, versatility, and ease of preparation, a consumer may be more willing to purchase the local product (Abrams & Meyers, 2009; Keeling-Bond et al., 2009; Onozaka et al, 2004).

Promotional materials communicating preferred attributes should be placed in grocery stores and near products during their months of availability when possible. For example, promotional materials could provide alternatives to local foods not available during a particular season and also could provide easy, healthy, and quick recipes for seasonal products. Communication practitioners should encourage commodity organizations and producers to promote these attributes and develop similar materials for local food products. Additionally, communicators should use caution when using months of availability and growing location within the state to promote local products as this information had little impact on product selection in this study. However, this information was found to be interesting among the participants. Communicators should partner with the extension service to incorporate information about products grown in the state and the availability of these products in non-formal educational programming for consumer audiences interested in local food. Implementation of these recommendations will enhance communication and promotion of local food within the state, ultimately, impacting buying decisions.

Future research should continue to examine the effects of frames on consumers' food-buying decisions and perceptions. Specifically, comparing the effects of different frames, on different food products, and different audiences, would be of interest. Researchers should use the five attributes identified by participants to develop local food messages. These messages should be tested through research with a desired target audience. Similar research should be conducted within Florida to determine if the outcomes of the scenarios differ when participants are given foods not grown in Florida or even in the United States. Additionally, this research should be replicated in other states. Since the type and availability of local food varies by state, replication in other states could provide state specific implications as well as opportunities for comparison. A quantitative study assessing the influence of frames on behavioral intent to buy local food also would be of interest. This study was specific to residents in the State of Florida and generalization beyond this population should be done with caution.

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