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A Case Study of the Symbolic Value of Community Supported Agriculture Membership

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Abstract

Sometimes a vegetable is just a vegetable, but how and where it is grown and sold can imbue a lowly potato with status: organic, local, Fairtrade, Peruvian! This paper examines the symbolic value of Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) as a vegetable delivery system using a focus group study. We find that for both current and former members, CSA has both symbolic and private meaning and confers status to vegetables, but has little influence on the perceived status of agriculture. However, only continuing CSA members demonstrate learned cues, perceptions of appraisal, improved role performance, and confer status to the CSA farmer.

Keywords: Community Supported Agriculture (CSA), symbolic value

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Introduction

“Eat your vegetables,” is an admonition we all remember from our childhood. Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) is a social innovation (Taylor 1970) that, among other things, facilitates eating vegetables (Pole & Gray 2013; Russell & Zepeda 2008). While CSAs sell many farm products, they are often prepaid shares of produce (Feagan & Henderson 2009; Fieldhouse 1996; Wells & Gradwell 2001). CSA began in the US in 1986 with two farms (McFadden n.d.) and by 2007, grew to over 12,500 (USDA 2009). For farmers, prepayment increases prices received and cash flow, provides a stable income, and transfers production risk to consumers (Fieldhouse 1996; Schmidt, Kolodinsky, DeSisto & Conte 2011). However, the origins of CSA has a distinctly activist tone: a desire to create community and an alternative to industrial agriculture (Indian Line Farm n.d.; Thompson & Coskuner-Balli 2007a).

This has led researchers to focus on the motivations to join CSA, and the extent membership results in community (DeLind 1999; Feagan & Henderson 2009; Sumner, Mair & Nelson 2010; Trauger, Sachs, Barbercheck, Brasier & Kiernan 2010) or in changing the food system (Thompson & Coskuner-Balli 2007a; Wells & Gradwell 2001). Recent research finds the primary motivations to join are acquisition of fresh local vegetables (Pole & Gray 2013) and increasing vegetable consumption (MacMillan Uribe, Winham & Wharton 2012; Russell & Zepeda 2008). While CSA members agree that environmental, economic and social sustainability are important aspects of CSA (Adams & Salois 2010; Brown, Dury & Holdsworth 2009; Hokanen, Verplanken & Olsen 2006; Kolodinsky & Pelch 1997; Lusk & Briggeman 2009; MacMillan Uribe, Winham & Wharton 2012; Roininen, Arvola & Lahteenmaki 2006; Thompson & Coskuner-Balli 2007a), research has not supported community building as a key outcome (Pole & Gray 2013) or has found that community building is imagined (Zepeda, Reznickova & Russell 2013). In their class analysis of CSA, Hinrichs and Kremer (2002) found more advantaged members (in terms of income, education and occupation) identified quality and philosophy as primary reasons to join CSA, while over half the disadvantaged members, who also received subsidies, identified affordability.

These studies point to primarily functional, individualistic explanations for joining CSA. However, a communal aspect of CSA that has been overlooked is the role of food in culture and social interaction. A study in France on the social value of organic food found CSA affected the perceived status of organic vegetables (Costa, Zepeda, & Sirieix 2011). Bourdieu (1984) identifies food as an important means of creating distinction between individuals or social classes within a culture. Applying this to American culture, Holt (1998) finds social class is associated with distinctive food preferences. Johnston, Szabo and Rodney (2011) find that social class is associated with access to ethical eating options. This points to the possibility that CSA may have social or symbolic value. Indeed, Press and Arnould (2011) claim that CSA is heir to the 19th century cultural legacy of American pastoralism, while Thompson and Coskuner-Balli (2007a) characterize CSA as creating an artisanal food culture. This raises the questions: is CSA membership a cultural symbol and does it affect the status of produce received?

Using focus group transcripts of continuing and former members of a CSA serving Madison, Wisconsin, USA, we use Solomon's (1983) paper on product symbolism to examine whether CSA has a symbolic function. Does CSA drive members' behavior and self-identity? Does CSA

also have private meaning? How does CSA affect the symbolic value of the produce received, and the farmers and farms that produce it?

Conceptual Framework: Symbolic Consumption and CSA

Symbolic interactionism is a sociological theory originating with Mead (1922) that asserts that we give meaning to our actions through symbols. Solomon (1983) views products as stimuli for role fulfillment rather than simply functional responses to needs. Solomon's propositions (Table 1) identify eight characteristics of symbolic products: shared meaning, learned cues, reflexive evaluation, role performance, private and social meaning, lack of role knowledge, script uncertainty, and role transition. Since status may not be obvious, Proposition 1 (P1) implies we use symbols to evaluate the status of others and to project our own status (Turner 2011). This symbolic value is learned (P2); the learning process helps define and validate one's role through everyday actions (Blumer 1969). The symbols convey meaning and status (P3, P5), influencing perceptions of the value of products used for self-image, group membership, role position, and ego identification (Boksberger & Melsen 2011; Holbrook 1996). Lee (1990) uses symbolic interaction to explain consumer choice as a form of image management for self and others about who the consumer wants to (appear to) be (P4). An implication is that the more visible or public the consumption of a product is, the more conscious one is about their choice, whereas the more private the consumption, the more one is concerned about a product's functional aspects. Lee is relevant to CSA to the extent that pickup is visible to, or one discusses CSA. Lynch and McConatha (2006) would apply similarly to the use of social media to communicate one's membership or by a CSA to attract and communicate with members.

Table 1. Solomon's (1983) Eight Propositions for Symbolic Use of Products

P1: Material goods produced by a culture have symbolic properties with meanings that are shared within that culture.
P2: Learned cues inherent in product symbolism drive behavior, either by facilitating or by inhibiting role performance.
P3: Actor's reflexive evaluation of the meaning assigned by others is influenced by the products with which the self is surrounded.
P4: The probability of a successful role performance is increased to the degree that material symbols surrounding the role player parallels the symbolism associated with that role.
P5: Products are consumed both for their social meaning (as symbols) and for their private meaning (as signs).
P6: The probability that product symbolism will exert an a priori influence on behavior is inversely proportional to the individual's degree of extant role knowledge.
P7: Role demands characterized by script uncertainty are accompanied by an increased reliance upon (and hence consumption of) symbolic products as a guide to behavior.
P8: Periods of role transition render the novice role player especially reliant upon the use of relevant product cues to guide role-appropriate behavior.

Leigh and Gabel (1992) identify the characteristics of consumers, products, and marketing strategies associated with symbolic consumption. They find that consumers in role transition (P8), those who place a high value on advancement and social group membership, and those

trying to gain membership into a particular group (P7) are most likely to engage in symbolic consumption. They posit that lack of role knowledge encourages reliance on products to demonstrate one's role (P6). Thus, children, teens, young adults, the upwardly mobile, those newest to a group, the insecure, and the status conscious are the most likely to use symbolic consumption. In addition, they identify more symbolic purchases within groups that are exclusive, distinctive, homogenous, formal, and or meet frequently, and that these groups are often characterized by race, age, education level, income, or occupation.

Leigh and Gabel (1992) identify the characteristics of products with symbolic value as: expensive, associated with performance, complex, specialty items, ego enhancing, consumed in public, or associated with social roles. Shavitt, Torelli, and Wong (2009) emphasize that products activate identity when they are visibly consumed and have shared meaning. Leigh and Gabel (1992) identify effective strategies in promoting symbolic consumption as: ambiguous; premium pricing; and/or an exclusive distribution system, even if the product is not expensive.

Analyzing CSA using Leigh and Gabel (1992) reveals that, albeit unintentional, CSA consumers, products, and marketing strategies are consistent with symbolic consumption. CSA is tied to place by construct, which serves as an exclusion factor that could encourage homogeneity among CSA members. Indeed, CSA members tend to be white, educated, high income, and female (Pole & Gray 2013). Even when CSAs have mechanisms to attract low-income households, they may fail to reach the truly disadvantaged (Hinrichs & Kremer 2002). As to the products, they are seasonal, with the quantity and variety determined by the farmer, as well as the weather, and they involve direct sales; all of these reflect a specialty product with symbolic characteristics. Indeed, Thompson and Coskuner-Balli (2007a) and Zepeda et al. (2013) characterize CSA as creating an artisanal food culture that promotes cooking skills and distinctive meal planning. Finally, the distribution system can be viewed as exclusive since most CSAs require members to prepay for the season, as well as, pick up at a specific time and place. This extra effort and expense may be too costly for some US households, particularly working poor using public transportation. Thompson and Coskuner-Balli (2007b) find that CSA members view these inconveniences as "enchanted moral virtues" demonstrating members' commitment to sustainability. Thus, by construct, not intent, CSA has exclusionary characteristics typical of products with symbolic value. While some CSAs try to be more inclusive by accepting government food benefits (Joshua Farm n.d.) or selling weekly shares (Growing Power n.d.), Holt (1998) would predict that educated, high-income members would value exclusionary characteristics *because* they are distinctive.

Berger and Shiv (2011) conduct experiments that show distinctiveness may be rewarding because it is often paired with other rewards. Looking specifically at green behaviors, Griskevicius, Tybur, and Van den Bergh (2010) show that status and higher cost influence consumers' desire for green products. They argue that one can build a pro-social reputation by using green products and this reputation is valuable because it yields greater trust, higher status, and more desirable friends, allies, and partners. With explicit environmental and community goals, CSA can be viewed as pro-social; the implications are that high cost, effort, and greater visibility increase the status value of CSA membership. In other words, members who discuss or use social media about their membership or are seen at the pick-up site may increase their status or reputation among their social circle.

Through everyday practices continuing members learn and ultimately create the CSA culture, explaining why CSA members tend to have similar characteristics. By becoming a member one approves of the practices in theory. Those not attracted to the practices will not join a CSA. If one is in conflict with the actual practices, she leaves or does not renew. Following Hallett (2003), if one continues membership, one integrates the practices, imbuing the CSA (farmer, membership, produce) with legitimacy and symbolic power. So while CSA may not intend to, it appears to have many aspects that are compatible with symbolic consumption.

Therefore, we propose to examine the symbolic value of CSA membership. We develop five research questions about CSA membership from Solomon's (1983) first five propositions of consumers' symbolic use of products. His propositions 6-8 would require observations over time, which we do not have. We propose research questions rather than hypotheses for two reasons: first, Solomon's propositions are not formulated as research questions, making it important to articulate empirical research questions. Second, we cannot test hypotheses statistically using qualitative information. The research questions are:

- R1:** Does CSA membership have symbolic properties with shared cultural meaning?
- R2:** Do learned cues from CSA membership drive member's behavior?
- R3:** Does CSA membership influence one's perception of others' appraisal?
- R4:** Does CSA membership increase the probability of successful role performance?
- R5:** Does CSA membership also have private meaning? Additionally, we examine whether CSA membership confers symbolic value or status to the vegetables received (R6), to the CSA farmer (R7) and to farming in general (R8).

Materials and Methods

We use a focus group study of current and former CSA members to address these research questions (Silverman 2000). Given the complex, qualitative, leading nature of these questions, a structured questionnaire would likely yield answers with social desirability bias. Indirect, open questions permit participants to talk about what is important to them, and a focus group is ideal to elicit perceptions (Kreuger 1994). Participants are encouraged to express their views, rather than limiting responses as with a survey instrument. The advantage of a focus group over individual interviews is it requires less time to collect responses and participants can interact; the disadvantage is that participants may influence each other and it does not permit as much probing as individual interviews.

The protocol was reviewed and approved by a university human subjects review board. The focus group study took place in Madison, Wisconsin, USA in 2006. The CSA was in its fourth year of operation and had grown from a half-hectare farm with about 20 members to a two-hectare farm with 100 members. Twenty-three participants who were current or former members of this CSA were recruited for the study, representing nearly a quarter of the current membership (Table 2). Restricting participants to a single CSA controlled for potential differences in responses due to the farm structure, farmer, or location; the quantity, quality and variety of produce; and the social and volunteering opportunities offered by the CSA.

Table 2. Participant Demographics

Demographic	Raw #	% of Participants	Demographic	Raw #	% of Participants
Age*			Marital Status		
Range	22-85	(mean 47)	Single	7	30%
Sex			Married	12	52%
Female	17	74%	Partner	3	13%
Male	6	26%	Undisclosed	1	4%
Education			Employment		
High School	1	4%	Employed	20	87%
Associates	2	9%	Stay At Home	1	4%
Bachelors	12	52%	Parent		
Masters	4	17%	Retired	2	9%
Professional	1	4%	Household Income		
PhD	3	13%	Less than \$30,000	3	13%
Ethnicity			\$30,000-\$59,999	13	57%
Caucasian	20	87%	\$60,000-\$89,999	3	13%
Asian American	1	4%	Over \$90,000	3	13%
Undisclosed	2	9%	Undisclosed	1	4%

Krueger (1994) recommended that a focus group have no more than 12 participants and that each group have similar characteristics so participants feel comfortable expressing their opinions; clearly someone who had quit the CSA might feel self-conscious about their decision with current members. Three categories of participants were recruited to participate in four focus groups: new and renewing (Groups 1 and 2), engaged (Group 3), and former (Group 4) members. Two focus groups were permitted for new and renewing members because they were the largest number of members and this facilitated scheduling. Engaged participants were CSA members who were involved in the CSA beyond simply picking up their weekly farm share; they were part of a small leadership group that, among other things, planned events or provided oversight for operations, and/or worked on the farm in exchange for their weekly farm share. Former members belonged to the CSA for at least one year, but did not renew during the season this research was conducted. Each group had five participants, except Group 3, which had eight.

Each focus group discussion lasted between one-and-a-half to three hours, including introductions, informed consent, a short demographic survey, refreshments, and the discussion. A co-author moderated the discussions. Each discussion was audio recorded and then transcribed professionally. Codes replaced the names of each respondent to protect their privacy; a number refers to their group, a letter to a participant in that group. Thus, the participants are referred to as 1a-e, 2a-e, 3a-h, and 4a-e.

Participants were instructed that different points of view were welcome and the purpose was not to seek a consensus. They were also instructed that each individual would be asked to respond to ensure that everyone had a chance to talk, but they were not required to respond. The order was reversed so that the same person did not respond first to each question. The first set of questions was general:

- why did they join a CSA in general and the specific CSA, in particular;
- where appropriate, why they renewed;
- what improvements they would recommend;
- how they engaged with the farm;
- how they traveled to the farm;
- and what additional shopping they did.

To reduce respondent fatigue, a short break was taken, then participants were asked to describe:

- a positive or negative experience with the farm;
- whether they socialized with the other CSA members;
- a positive or negative experience with the other members;
- what they had in common with other members besides being a member of the CSA;
- what they had learned since joining;
- and how their lifestyle or habits had changed since joining.

The open-ended and indirect nature of the questions avoided leading responses and allowed participants to talk about what they thought was important. If responses were unclear, the facilitator followed-up with neutral probing questions, e.g. “tell us more about that.”

One co-author categorized responses for each of the eight research questions using first cycle coding; these were reviewed by another co-author to resolve any ambiguities (Table 3). Quotes were selected to illustrate the discussion of each research question, choosing different respondents to ensure expression of multiple voices. Table 4 shows the number of respondents who made a statement concerning each of the research questions, however, often each respondent made multiple remarks per question.

Table 3. Examples of Codes Supporting Each of the Research Questions

Research Question #	Position	Key concepts
R1	CSA has shared meaning	Common values, philosophy and meanings
R2	CSA and learned cues	Learning, trying new things, changing habits based on CSA
R3	CSA alters appraisal perception	Teaching/talking to others, judgment of other food venues
R4	CSA promotes successful role performance	Perception of success in food preparation, storage; enjoyment of food related roles
R5	CSA has private meaning	Personal enjoyment associated with the CSA; aesthetics; fulfillment
R6	CSA enhances the status of vegetables	Quality, taste, freshness, inspiration
R7	CSA enhances the status of farmer	Hard-work; providing food; trying new things
R8	CSA enhances the status of agriculture	Interaction with farm land, appreciation of landscape

Table 4. Number of Participants Whose Comments Support Each Research Question

	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 4	All
R1 CSA has shared meaning	4/5	3/5	7/8	3/5	17/23
R2 CSA and learned cues	5/5	5/5	5/8	1/5	16/23
R3 Appraisal perception	3/5	4/5	4/8	1/5	12/23
R4 Successful role performance	5/5	3/5	7/8	0/5	15/23
R5 CSA has private meaning	4/5	5/5	7/8	3/5	19/23
R6 Status of vegetables	5/5	5/5	4/8	2/5	16/23
R7 Status of farmer	5/5	4/5	7/8	2/5	18/23
R8 Status of agriculture	2/5	3/5	1/8	0/5	6/23

Results

R1. Does CSA membership have symbolic properties with meanings shared within that culture?

Three-quarters of the participants expressed some form of shared meaning in their responses (Table 4). Examples of evidence for R1 included statements by participants that CSA membership was a means for them to obtain food that is organic, local, or healthy; support or share risks with the farmer; be a part of a community, neighborhood, or philosophy; or to have an alternative to buying from big corporations:

It's not just about health, but food is so important to everything. Who would have thought it, but it has social implications, it has socioeconomic implications, the local nature of it. CSA has the values. It's just an awareness, and thoughtfulness about it. (Respondent 2-c)

Some of these characteristics (e.g. organic, local, shared risks) might be familiar to those not belonging to CSA, but it is the members' emphasis on these characteristics as highly valued within the membership community that gives them shared symbolic meaning. Thus, the concept of local or organic within the CSA membership has greater meaning than simply where and how food is produced; the members convey shared values when talking about the CSA food:

So the garden was important, but the philosophy of the whole (name of CSA removed) enterprise, the community aspect of it, was really tops for me. (Respondent 3-h)

The fact that someone outside the membership may understand or even value these characteristics does not preclude the shared meaning within the community; the Golden Rule is a tenet of most religions, but one does not need to be religious to appreciate it.

R2. Do learned cues from CSA membership drive member's behavior?

All Group 1 and 2 participants made statements about what they learned by being members from the newsletter or by dealing with their weekly share (Table 4). This implies that part of the motivation behind joining for Groups 1 and 2 was to learn more about food and food preparation:

I think that's another part of it that's kind of interesting about having a farm share is that there is a lot more upkeep at home. You get your produce, and it's really different from buying it in the grocery store for the fact that you have to take care of it, and make sure that you're storing it properly, or it will go bad. (Respondent 2-a)

In contrast, only 60% of the engaged members (Group 3) and only one former (Group 4) member made such statements. It may be that participants in Groups 3 and 4 were more knowledgeable and skilled in these matters. In fact, three former members stated they did not learn anything.

R3. Does CSA membership influence one's perception of others' appraisal?

At least half of the respondents in Groups 1-3 (Table 4) made statements reflective of CSA membership influencing their perceptions of others:

And the other thing that I've noticed changed is just some friends of mine are a little bit more receptive to the idea of gardening and stuff like that. (Respondent 3-d)

In Group 1 during a discussion of why CSA members would prefer not shop at Wal-Mart, the following comment illustrated how this affected one's view of self and others:

Maybe I'm paying a little more for it than I would pay at a Wal-Mart type grocery store, but I'm getting so much more out of it, and it is informed. That helps support my lifestyle, which is more important to me than a cheap buy. (Respondent 1-e)

Typical comments from Groups 2 and 3 regarding perceptions of others and CSA included:

It is also a little bit of sense of community, just belonging to the group, seeing the same people each week, picking up your vegetables, and realizing that in some way we share the same values, I think, is real nice. (Respondent 2-e)

In contrast, only one former member made a positive comment. As might be expected, former members were generally dissatisfied with their experience. Their statements reflected other priorities or inflexibility; being a member was not tied to others' appraisal:

I also am a very cost conscious, and so I'm not going to buy something just because it says organic... why am I going to do that? (Respondent 4-c)

This person wanted membership to provide them with cheap vegetables, not symbolic value through appraisal of others.

R4. Does CSA membership increase the probability of successful role performance?

We examined how CSA membership affected members' food related roles. Almost all the participants from Groups 1-3 (Table 4) talked about how membership changed the way they prepared and viewed food and food procurement:

I have been actually able to put into practice more being involved in getting the food, making the food. (Respondent 1-c);

None of the participants in Group 4 expressed that CSA membership helped them in their role performance. Rather, they talked about how CSA membership did not meet their needs:

I would have liked to have had a heck of a lot more recipes and just a lot more vegetables. (Respondent 4-e)

R5. Does CSA membership also have private meaning?

Along with symbolic or social meaning, nearly all participants talked about the private meaning of membership (Table 4). To illustrate:

I'm not looking necessarily for other people to share this.... It comes after a busy day at work and you might be really frantic, and rushed, and whatever. You go there and being at the place where your food is grown is very grounding, for me anyway. It reminds me of what is really important. (Respondent 1-e)

For continuing members, nearly all expressed the importance of being a part of the CSA was to them personally. For some it was an aesthetic and emotional experience:

I remember the first year that the farm was there, and the first time I saw it after it was in production, I cried because it was so beautiful. I get choked up just saying it. It just took all those years and so much effort, for so many people to get it to happen. It's an incredible experience that I will never forget. (Respondent 1-a)

For others the private meaning was about practical wellbeing:

I get to see a friend, and I get good food. (Respondent 2-b)

For others it was transformative or spiritual:

I can't tell you what it did for my soul just to go down (farmer's name)'s basement and see all those things (seedlings) because I used to start all my own stuff. (Respondent 3-b)

And for others the private meaning connected the participant to their own past:

I feel it's a part of my history ... an agrarian strain that started out when I helped my grandmother in her garden ... a feeling as if I'm close to the earth, even though I'm not gardening. I'm close to the food and close to its source and something that I think is really important that many people have simply lost. (Respondent 3-h)

Even among those who discontinued their membership three out of five mentioned some form of private meaning. Typically, these reflected activities rather than emotional experiences:

I like the hard work. I went every Wednesday. I loved it. It was really fun. (Respondent 4-d)

R6. Does CSA membership confer status to the vegetables received?

All the participants in Groups 1 and 2 and about half the participants in Groups 3 and 4 made comments about how the vegetables from the CSA farm were superior to those purchased elsewhere (Table 4). The respondents were effusive in their praise of the quality of the vegetables and how this influenced them:

And I didn't anticipate the beauty of the vegetables...The vegetables are just so beautifully trimmed and displayed...And [the beets] are like a whole different creature in that they're both beautiful to behold and the sugars come up and they are very tasty. (Respondent 3-b)

Some were more general in their praise, saying they were delicious (e.g Respondent 2-c). While others had favorite vegetables:

I love those edamame. Oh my gosh! (Respondent 4-c)

R7. Does CSA membership confer status to the CSA farmer?

Membership raised most of the respondents' appreciation for the CSA farmer; nearly all the continuing members described the farmer in glowing terms (Table 4). Some comments were succinct:

I think (farmer's name) is awesome. (Respondent 1-b)

While others were more descriptive:

And last year was really hard (due to bad weather), so (the anxiety of being a farmer) probably showed a lot more....The fact that you go from being a pure consumer of vegetables, that someone else has to worry about growing and making a living off of, to being a part of the process of production, and then I feel like watching (name of farmer) is kind of another level of that because her commitment is so astounding! (Respondent 3-f)

While former members complained about the distribution or amount of produce they received from the farmer, two at least recognized the hard work and difficulties faced by the farmer.

R8. Does CSA membership confer status to farming?

While nearly all the continuing members were fans of the farmer and of the vegetables produced and what they learned about vegetables and farming, CSA membership did not seem to have as big an impact on the status of agriculture beyond the CSA. Only six of the 18 continuing members and none of the former members made comments that reflected a greater appreciation of farming (Table 4), for example:

Every year you're not just learning new things, but your horizons are broadened in some way that you didn't think they would be...always learning something new about agriculture.
(Respondent 3-e)

Discussion

CSA has many characteristics that are consistent with Leigh and Gabel's (1992) assessment of consumers, products, and marketing strategies associated with symbolic consumption: CSA is tied to geographic place, attracting consumers associated with that place who are likely to be homogenous. CSA also produces artisanal, specialty items and the emphasis on fresh, seasonal "shares" of a farm promotes distinctive meal planning and cooking skills (Thompson & Coskuner-Balli 2007a). Prepayment and set pick-up locations and times are characteristics of an exclusive distribution system. While CSA was not designed to create symbolic value, these characteristics are associated with symbolic value, hence the motivation to conduct this research. Although we understand there are mechanisms in place to make CSA more accessible and affordable (e.g. Growing Power n.d.; Joshua Farm n.d.), members tend to be middle/upper class, educated, white, not blue-collar people (Hinrichs & Kremer 2002; Lang 2005).

In this case study, we find support for five of Solomon's (1983) propositions of symbolic consumption, for Leigh and Gabel's (1992) analysis of the characteristics associated with symbolic consumption, as well as for Hallett's (2003) analysis that negotiated practices are self-reinforcing. Consistent with Lee's (1990) discussion, the CSA members showed signs of both private and public symbolic value; these are additional motivations for the growth in CSA membership. Private meaning included functional aspects of the product: preparing, cooking and storing the vegetable, but consistent with Chen (2013) members also used the CSA farm as a place of relaxation and to connect with the environment. Through private symbolic consumption, the status of the vegetables and the farmer increased. Looking at public symbolic consumption, paying for a CSA is perceived as a prestigious act and members are perceived as in-group. Rather than competing, this external motivation complements personal meaning. This points to the need for future work to examine public and personal motivations for symbolic consumption together, rather than separately.

Boksberger and Melsen (2011) would predict CSA membership should convey symbolic value to CSA products. Indeed, we found in this case study that membership did have a positive impact on the status of vegetables for the participants. The effect was less strong for engaged members and former members in this study. In the case of engaged members, it could be that they became engaged for other reasons than the vegetables, such as a desire for community and social change. Or perhaps vegetables already have high status in their eyes and so they did not feel the need to talk about them, instead, they focused on other issues they found important. Despite leaving the CSA, most former members still had a high opinion of the CSA produce; however, they were not satisfied with the quantity and variety they received.

The differences between continuing and former members were greater when looking at the status of the farmer. Nearly all the continuing members conveyed status to the farmer. While some former members complemented the farmer, as Hallett (2003) would predict, all former members expressed some form of dissatisfaction with the farmer. Finally, CSA membership in this case

study had little impact on the status of agriculture. None of the former members expressed an increased appreciation for agriculture, and only a third of the continuing members indicated that it was important to understand the food system.

The respondents in this case study view continuing CSA membership as a symbol having social value. That the interactions of members define social norms in their CSA is consistent with Mead (1922). As Solomon (1983) proposed, continuing membership becomes a stimulus for role performance and fulfillment for these participants. Continuing members learn and validate their roles via everyday actions related to food procurement, preparation, and consumption, while those who leave do not. They use the vegetables as guides or cues for their behaviors. Indeed Thompson and Coskuner-Balli (2007b) characterize CSA membership as having an experiential aspect that reconnects members to food production. CSAs could explicitly recognize this symbolic value by promoting membership to improve food preparation skills and knowledge, as well as to connect with like-minded people. For continuing members in this case study, CSA membership confers status to self, to the produce received, to the farmer, and to a lesser degree, agriculture. Whereas for those who left, there is a lesser degree of shared and private meaning, there are little or no learned cues, appraisal perception or improved role performance, and little status is conveyed to the vegetable or farmer and none to agriculture.

Conclusions

A focus group study of 23 current and former CSA members serving Madison, Wisconsin, USA is used to examine the symbolic value of CSA membership, and whether it confers status to the vegetables produced, the CSA farmer, and agriculture in general. The case study provides qualitative evidence that community supported agriculture has symbolic value for the continuing participants. The first five of Solomon's (1983) eight propositions about the symbolic value of products were examined as research questions (Table 1).

About three-quarters of the respondents, regardless of whether they continued their membership or not, mentioned shared meaning (Table 4). Even more made comments about the private meaning of CSA. Rather than a dichotomy of private and public meaning (Lee 1990) or a focus on only the public meaning (Griskevicius et al. 2010), CSA membership appears to have both important private and public meaning for the participants. Indeed a strong and emotional private meaning seems to reinforce public meaning in this case study.

While CSA appears to have public and private meaning for all participant groups, former CSA members learned less from membership than continuing members, were less likely to view membership as affecting their appraisal by others, and none indicated that CSA membership helped them in their role performance. Hallett (2003) would explain the former members' attrition as a result of having practices in conflict with the CSA (e.g. being cost conscious); thus, those in conflict leave of their own accord.

Applying Hallett's (2003) analysis to continuing members, by learning about different vegetables, how to care for and prepare them, they create a self-reinforcing, consumption culture. This in turn affected participants' role performance, how they saw themselves and how they perceived others saw them. In addition, they evaluated others based on belonging to a CSA,

adopting an “us” versus “them” mentality; they saw it as their task to inform and introduce their practices to their family and friends. The participants’ perceptions of themselves as being higher status are reflected in their negative comments targeted to “others,” for example, people perceived as not making the right choices, such as shopping at Wal-Mart.

This case study has several potential implications for CSA. Given that CSA consumers, products and venues have several characteristics typical of symbolic consumption (Leigh & Grabel 1992), it is not surprising that we found support for five of Solomon’s (1983) propositions of symbolic value in this case study. While symbolic value can be benign, one must be mindful of how these characteristics may unintentionally pose a barrier to inclusive membership. For example, are CSA pickup locations and hours accessible for those utilizing public transport? Do the products in the farm share reflect a specific cuisine or cultural food tastes? In addition, Solomon’s propositions help to reveal how the process of symbolic value is created and can be used to foster greater inclusivity within CSA membership. For example, a CSA can explicitly recognize and share meaning with new members through an orientation and/or be conscious about being open to new or different views and needs of members.

For this particular CSA, membership did confer rock star status to the vegetables and the farmer, but not agriculture. The implication is that making vegetables *desirable*, as opposed to, or in addition to, conveying that they are healthy, is an effective strategy to encourage greater consumption of vegetables. CSAs often use newsletters, websites, a farmer at the pickup site, or members coming to the farm as opportunities to tell the farmer’s story. Symbolic value offers an explanation of why such practices would convey greater status to the farmer and her products. Finally, for this CSA, fostering greater appreciation for vegetables and the farmer did not convey greater status to agriculture; this suggests members may need more help in thinking abstractly about how their CSA fits into the agricultural landscape.

The main limitation of this research is that as a qualitative study, it involves a small number of participants, and these experiences cannot be generalized. However, the strength of a qualitative study is the ability to explore and examine why people do what they do (Johnston, Szabo & Rodney 2011) to provide directions for future research. We have found support for the five propositions of Solomon (1983) in this case study of CSA members and offer explanations for these findings. The findings point to the potential of a large quantitative study to examine the symbolic value conveyed by CSA membership, its products, farmers, and agriculture in general. In addition, future work could examine how symbolic value varies among classes to examine how to promote greater inclusion of disadvantaged populations in CSA.

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