Narrative curation and stewardship in contested marketspaces

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Abstract
We identify value narratives as stories that promote certain product or service attributes as benefits within the marketplace. We show how value narratives reflect benefit attributes that align with alternative versus mainstream market settings. Our empirical focus is local food value narratives within a common local food system with alternative settings being farmers’ markets and mainstream settings being supermarkets. Farmers’ market and supermarket purveyors choose which benefit characteristics to emphasize throughout narrative curation, enabling us to witness strategic narrative use, or what we term narrative stewardship.

We find that multiple value narratives express an array of ‘local food’ benefits in ways that create a contested marketplace. Narrative deployment at farmers’ markets is guided by an amalgam of institutional perspectives, while narrative use at supermarkets is dominated by a market institutional perspective. We identify a continuum of value narrative stewardship (promotion-neglect) within farmers’ markets that leaves the meaning and value of ‘local food’ vulnerable to mainstream market appropriation via narrative voidance, dilution, and replacement. We propose strategies for better value narrative stewardship.

Keywords Institutional logics · Narratives · Contested markets · Market movements · Local food · Visual data

"Those who tell the stories rule the world.”
—Hopi proverb.

Value narratives are marketplace expressions of the conditions and factors that bring meaning and structure to firm- and industry-level activities and strategies (i.e., institutional logics) (Bourdieu, 1984; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Harmon et al., 2015; Thornton & Ocasio, 1999). In this study, we examine the ways marketers (local food microentrepreneurs and supermarket produce managers) strategically use value narratives associated with locally sourced food products (McGrath et al., 1993; Murphy, 2011). We ask the following two questions: (1) How are value narratives strategically used in a contested marketplace? (2) What is the market impact of value narrative deployment strategies in a contested marketplace? Specifically, we examine the ways marketers (local food microentrepreneurs and supermarket produce managers) strategically use value narratives associated with locally sourced food products (McGrath et al., 1993; Murphy, 2011). We are especially attentive to how narratives express institutional logics and are strategically used by microentrepreneurs to convey local food movement value narratives within farmers’ markets relative to supermarkets positioned in the same local food system.

We utilize an extended multi-site cross-case study consisting of participant market observations, microentrepreneur and supermarket produce manager interviews, and a structured photo analysis (Collier & Collier, 1986; Ruby, 1981) of 10 retail sites—five farmers’ markets and five supermarkets located within a single local food system. Since service encounters are brief, largely transactional, and sometimes without human interaction (especially in supermarkets), communication of value narratives relies heavily on in-store displays and reference material (Crilly et al., 2004; Schroeder, 2002). As such, we examine marketing collateral, point-of-purchase visual displays of products labeled ‘local’ across farmers’ markets and supermarkets, and service encounters,
noting the visual cues that represent (or fail to represent) the local food movement agenda. We illustrate how the value narratives that represent the local food movement agenda are often neglected by microentrepreneurs at farmers’ markets and appropriated by supermarkets. Interviews with local food microentrepreneurs and supermarket produce managers reveal the perspectives and rationales that inform the narrative curation (what logics are included in value narratives) and patterns of value narrative stewardship at points of purchase. Our data demonstrate a continuum of narrative stewardship (promotion-neglect) within farmers’ markets that render the local food movement value narrative vulnerable to narrative appropriation (voidance, dilution, replacement) by the mainstream retailers the local food movement seeks to resist. We conclude by proposing strategies for better value narrative stewardship.

**Empirical context: Local food**

Consumers are concerned over where and how their food is grown, sourced, and produced, and the associated impacts of food and food markets on their well-being and more generally that of society and the environment (Feldmann & Hamm, 2015; McEachern et al., 2010). Local food sales rose dramatically, doubling from just under $5B in 2008 to nearly $10B in 2020 (Matlock, 2022). According to the USDA directory there has been a 300% jump in registered farmers’ markets in the last two decades (USDA, 2019), with many farmers’ markets experiencing strongest-ever sales in 2021 (Ledesema & Morales, 2021). This steep increase of local food demand during the pandemic is largely attributed to emergent value narratives regarding food security concerns (Ledesema & Morales, 2021), as supermarkets became linked to COVID-19 risks and global supply chain disruptions (Peyton, 2020).

The inspirations that undergird local food production entail the productive comingling and other times contentious clashing of constituents’ beliefs about what constitutes value (Mars & Schau, 2017). An upward trend in consumer demand and increased willingness to pay more for locally grown food (Hanson et al., 2019; Settembre, 2019) is inspired by a variety of benefits including aesthetic qualities such as taste and appearance (Alonso & O’Neil, 2011), healthfulness (Adams & Salois, 2010), localized economic development (Frash et al., 2015), environmental sustainability (Mazzocchi & Sali, 2016), cultural preservation (Yang et al., 2020), and social and economic justice (Hughner et al., 2007). Often these factors are knitted together within alternative markets by the desires of consumers, entrepreneurs, and marketers to resist, and at times overtly protest, the mainstream industrialized food system (Allen, 2010; Harris, 2010). Justice is often at the center of a local food movement agenda which in addition to recognizing the above benefits, prioritizes the advancement of environmentally sustainable production and consumption practices and opposes patronage of large-scale corporations that engage in labor exploitation and unfair competition strategies that squeeze out small-scale farmers, producers, and retailers (Allen, 2010). This precarious alliance constitutes the local food movement as an assortment of factions supporting an array of institutional logics united by an agenda of resistance to the global industrial food market including a quest for food justice and sovereignty (Mars & Schau, 2017).

The local food movement treats the local food market as a multifaceted ideological platform for economic, environmental, and social change and justice (DeLind, 2011; Mars, 2020) manifesting in alternative marketplaces, especially farmers’ markets. This platform supports local food microentrepreneurs, characterized as those that start and sustain enterprises that emphasize survivability over scalability, performing artisanship over mass production/replication, and seeking value creation over accumulation (Lumpkin & Bacq, 2019). The entrepreneurial motives and practices tied to local food production include the pursuit of regional market opportunities, along with advancement of social change, environmental protection and renewal, cultural preservation, and community development (Mars & Schau, 2018). For instance, some small-scale farmers engage in local food production with the intent of maintaining, “their livelihoods, while conserving land, and promoting environmental and social justice” (Bauermister, 2016: 123).

The expansion and diversification of local food systems occur with relatively little coordination and considerable latitude in the interpretation of what constitutes legitimate practices (Mount, 2012; Trivette, 2015). The determination of how products and processes are recognized and legitimized as ‘local’ is left largely to the consumers, entrepreneurs, and marketers who compose and sustain local food systems (Mars & Schau, 2019). Without a technical, formal definition of local or concrete guidelines for what is and is not considered local, the concept of local food is open to widespread interpretation (Feagan, 2007) and use of value narratives that comprise the local food movement. Further, this market informality leaves local food movement value narratives vulnerable to appropriation by corporate retailers who actively contribute to the global food system that the movement aims to resist (Allen, 2010).

Local food products and services were once mostly, if not entirely, available only through alternative market outlets like farmers’ markets. These specialty venues, in comparison to supermarkets, are more difficult to access due to reduced place utility and restricted hours of operation. Within these sites, local food microentrepreneurs are thought to inherently convey value narratives by touting the unique qualities of local food (e.g., environmental sustainability, healthfulness,
cultural preservation, justice) and the ability to actively resist the dominant global food system by subverting supermarkets to boost local economies (Hinrichs, 2000). Now, food products are marketed as being local within supermarkets, while continuing to command price premiums associated with alternative markets (Dunne et al., 2010). This change in availability contests the meaning of ‘local’ and multiple, synergistic values associated with the local food movement agenda, especially the market resistance component – allowing mainstream value narrative appropriation.

**Theoretical framework**

Our study is guided by institutional logics (Lounsbury, 2007; Marquis & Lounsbury, 2007; Purdy & Gray, 2009) as our enabling lens and market-oriented narratives (Grayson, 1997; Pace, 2008; Shankar & Goulding, 2001; Shankar et al., 2001) as our focal phenomenon. Constructs from these synergistic academic conversations inform our comparative analysis of how the articulation of local food value is a confluence of logics narrativized in similar and/or different ways across farmers’ markets and supermarkets within a single local food system.

**Institutional logics**

Institutional logics influence production and reproduction of social realities that provide meaning and structure to systems and organizational fields (Bourdieu, 1984; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Institutional logics provide organization members, from employees to managers to executive leaders, with guidelines for making practical and strategic decisions regarding activities and tasks pursued at both the organization and field levels (Friedland & Alford, 1991). Logic formation and maintenance occurs through convergence and perpetuation of assumptions, beliefs, motives, practices, and values held by individuals and organizations within common fields (Harmon et al., 2015; Thornton & Ocasio, 1999). There are three primary types of institutional logics: singular dominant logics, multiple logics that co-exist sometimes in competition, and amalgam logics created by selective linking of complete logics into hybrid logics (Pache & Santos, 2013) or combining elements across logics into blended logics (Ramus et al., 2017).

**Logic dominance, co-existence, and contestation**

Singular dominant logics are incumbent and well-established within organizations and across the fields they share, and eventually provide consistency and homogeneity to field-wide decision-making and practices (Lounsbury, 2002; Thornton & Ocasio, 2008). Turner et al. (2016) describe the dominant logic of the New Zealand agriculture system as one that strongly favors competitive scientific research and protective innovation. In doing so, the logic over time stifles progressive technological initiatives and co-innovation. Incumbent, dominant logics do not inherently go unchallenged. Social movements are often driven by alternative logics that counter those that sustain the status quo within established systems and fields (Lounsbury, 2005). Consider the grass-fed beef movement that is driven largely by an environmental logic that challenges the industrial logic of the global agricultural system (Weber et al., 2008). This logic actively opposes the incumbent dominant logic of large-scale farming efficiencies and natural resource exploitation.

A single dominant incumbent logic is not always present across an organizational field. This is especially likely within fields that are nascent, fragmented, rapidly changing, and/or contested (Purdy & Gray, 2009). Multiple logics can co-exist or compete within a single organizational field (Marquis & Lounsbury, 2007). The co-existence of, or competition between, multiple operating logics brings variation, disjunction, and sometimes change to the practices and strategies that those within organizations pursue across otherwise common fields (Lounsbury, 2007; Rao et al., 2003). Giesler (2008) examines peer-to-peer music downloading and how this practice of file sharing disrupted the longstanding market logic of music purchase and discrete possession. Ertimur and Coskuner-Balli (2015) describe how over 30-year time span yoga went from a cultural practice to a global practice that knits together spirituality, medicine, and fitness logics toward a market logic. Huff et al. (2021) demonstrate the transition of cannabis from a contraband underground logic toward a legitimate market. Press et al. (2014) illustrate how tensions between organic and chemical logics threaten the legitimacy and impede the adoption of production innovations in the commodity wheat market.

Lastly, amalgam logics can be selectively combined (hybrid) or formed by the merger of elements from multiple logics (blended) to add complexity and diversity to a field, while concurrently protecting and retaining core features and values (Glynn & Lounsbury, 2005; Mars & Lounsbury, 2009). Hassler-forest (2016) shows how through participative transmedia, complete logics of science fiction and fantasy can combine into a hybrid logic. The Maguire and Charters reference (2021:18) illustrate how the interactive work of trade associations, small-scale producers, and journalists in the champagne market blend to form a contemporary logic that preserves “dominant product definitions and quality claims while also giving rise to new ones.” This example points to narrative curation showing how blended logics simultaneously disrupt certain established features, while retaining and reinforcing others.

Building on work in the extant research evidencing individuals and firms vying to legitimize logics that disrupt
markets (e.g., Ertimur & Coskuner-Balli, 2015; Giesler, 2008, 2012; Huff et al., 2021; Humphreys, 2010), we examine the local food movement and the market surrounding locally sourced and produced food products as a site of logic contestation that manifests through the use of assorted value narratives. Recognizing the dynamism in markets make both dominant and resistance logics vulnerable to change, encroachment, and extinction, we focus on how logics influence solidarity among participating entrepreneurs and marketers (Chatzidakis et al., 2021), and carve out strategic positions in crowded and at times hotly contested marketplaces.

Value narratives as marketplace expressions of institutional logics

Institutional logics are conveyed through narratives that describe what motivates and guides firms and individuals within, from employees to managers to executives, across a field (Ocasio et al., 2015; Thornton et al., 2012). We extend this idea of logic narrative to include marketplace expressions of institutional logics that we term value narratives. From a marketing perspective, narratives are both functional and ontological in nature, making them apt tools for researchers to use when analyzing and understanding markets and consumption (Pace, 2008). Ontologically, narratives reveal how marketers and consumers organize market-oriented knowledge, memories, and emotions in narrative form (Pace, 2008). Meaning creation is not an individual process, but often collaboratively realized through iterative narrative creation, dissemination, and implementation (Pace, 2008). In this regard, the retail entities that craft and associate value narratives with products and/or experiences are actively co-creating meaning alongside consumers.

Researchers argue narrative analysis within marketing makes sense of complex normative beliefs about products and services and their respective benefits (Grayson, 1997; Pace, 2008; Shankar & Goulding, 2001; Shankar et al., 2001). The use of service scripts and in-store displays help marketers craft and disseminate value narratives that explicitly point consumers toward the benefits of purchase and use. Importantly, narratives “lead to the formation of vocabularies of practice” (Thornton et al., 2012: 155), or a common language, individuals can use to define messages and symbols and describe experiences.

Advertising is a widely used tool for value narrative creation and delivery. For instance, the heroic plots told through advertisements and campaigns are known to convey strong and persuasive content to consumers about the benefits of products and services advertised (Escalas, 2007; Pace, 2008). Further, Scott (1994) argues that narratives often rely on visual elements as rhetorical devices that are effective in telling compelling market stories that can move from media to points-of-purchase. Visual representation of a value narrative is based on the conventions, symbols, and signs shared by the sender and receiver. Consumers build associations with products through the value-laden stories told via branding (Twitchell, 2004) and carefully crafted and compelling narratives (Miller, 2017).

Amalgam institutional logics and value narratives within the local food movement

Farmers’ markets, as principal market platforms for the local food movement (Schupp, 2017), are presumed to function according to a hybrid logic, an amalgam of activist-, community-, ecological-health and wellness, and socio-cultural elements (Mars & Schau, 2017). Farmers’ markets provide consumers and entrepreneurs alike with the opportunity to express and act on their various existing activist-, community-, environmentally-, health and wellness-, and/or socio-culturally-oriented agendas through alternative food production and consumption choices (Bauermieister, 2016; Mars & Schau, 2017; Thompson & Coskuner-Balli, 2007a, 2007b). Accordingly, the amalgam hybrid logic becomes a single, yet multivocal value narrative for the engagement previously described. Table 1 provides an overview of the elemental logics that converge to form the hybrid local food logic. These elements constitute a set of values that is dependent on the development and consistent delivery of one or more narratives that purposefully create a link between “material practices and symbolic constructions” (Thornton et al. 2012: 155).

Local food microentrepreneurs and consumers whose motivations represent a compatible, yet multivocal desire to resist the dominant market together form the local food movement (Allen, 2010), which while largely united in resistance, is itself composed of factions. Consistent with previous research on social movement fragmentation (Fligstein & McAdam, 2012; McAdam, 2003; Soule & King, 2008; Weijio et al., 2018; Zald & McCarthy, 1980), the co-existence, convergence, and contestation of motives, activities, and strategies make the local food movement both ambiguous and heterogeneous (Mars & Schau, 2017). Such ambiguity and heterogeneity, in tandem with loose governance, leaves the meaning of local food open for various interpretations and vulnerable to appropriation (Kurland & McCaffrey, 2016; Mars & Schau, 2019; Mount, 2012). Accordingly, the strategic importance of clear, consistent value narratives that convey the specific local food movement amalgam within and across market settings is further heightened.

Key sites of value narrative stewardship, or the implementation of existing value narratives, for the amalgam local food movement logic have been specialty retail sites/alternative market outlets (e.g., farmers’ markets), but now mainstream retail sites (e.g., supermarkets) are increasingly carrying what are at least staged as local food products. Thus,
supermarkets are increasingly likely to be the first contact between consumers and local food value narratives. Supermarkets are guided by a single, dominant market logic that values high efficiency, mass production and consumption, and global scale distribution, all of which are antithetical features to the local food movement (Konefal et al., 2005; Tewari et al., 2018). Yet, purveyors, whether in farmers’ markets or supermarkets, work to strategically align their products with the economic, environmental, and social conditions and factors that motivate consumer behavior and decision-making in the domain (Bettman & Sujan, 1987; Grewal et al., 1994; Maheswaran & Meyers-Levy, 1990) causing palpable logic tensions.

We contend there are two likely logic dynamics associated with embedding of local food value narratives in mainstream retail settings (i.e., supermarkets). Local food products may be presented on supermarket shelves in pronounced ways that reflect the local food movement value narrative and thereby operate in opposition to the global food system—thus creating a competing logic dynamic. Conversely, supermarket purveyors may be more imperialistic with the features of the market logic narrative driving the integration of the notion of ‘local’ with the branding strategies of food products, voiding, diluting, or altogether replacing local food movement narratives.

Summary of theoretically derived key constructs

Markets are conversations about value available for exchange (Levine et al., 2009; Lusch et al., 2010). Markets engage many stakeholders including producers, service providers, retailers, consumers, competitors, market regulators, governments, and journalists (Wieland et al., 2016). These stakeholders often enter markets with competing perspectives on what constitutes value (Thornton, 2004; Vargo & Lusch, 2016). Drawing on institutional logics (Harmon et al., 2015; Thornton & Ocasio, 1999), we identify marketplace expressions of institutional logics as value narratives. We examine how existing value narratives are strategically selected (narrative curation) and used (narrative stewardship) in a contested marketplace to reveal the interplay of value narratives and the market impact of their deployment.

Methods

Study design

The scope of this study is value narratives pursued by local food microentrepreneurs as compared to those deployed in supermarkets. We use a multi-site cross-case study design (Creswell, 2013) to explore how narratives express institutional logics and are strategically used to convey local food
value narratives across two market-setting types within a common local food system: farmers’ markets and supermarkets. A multi-case study design allows for a richer, deeper analysis of the various ways in which local food microentrepreneurs and supermarket grocers convey value narratives across a common local food system. Our analytical strategy is both deductive and inductive and involves within- and cross-unit analysis (Gerring, 2007). This enables us to uncover within and compare between sites value narratives ‘local food’ marketers convey and the visual tactics they utilize to do so at points of purchase. We use the concept of intertextuality to reveal patterns and themes across four data sources (interviews, direct observations, collateral materials, photographs) (Rose, 2007).

Study site

Multi-site cross-case study design involves the exploration of a phenomenon within and across individual cases that are positioned within a common bounded system (Creswell, 2013). The individual cases comprising this study are five farmers’ markets and five supermarkets, all of which are bounded within the Southern Arizona (AZ)/Tucson, AZ metroplex food system. The Southern AZ food system spans three counties that have a combined 4,100-year history of agriculture and are home to many different cultural traditions and heritages that bring notable diversity and richness to the food terrain of the region. Local food production and consumption are a prominent aspect of the Southern AZ food system economy. The U.S. Department of Agriculture statistics show that one of three counties in the system maintains the second highest concentration of local food activities and alternative agriculture practices in its respective region. Nearly 80 percent of the 855 farms and ranches in the county operate on 50 acres or less, while approximately 56 percent of the second county’s farms and 44 percent of the third county’s farms operate within the same acreage range. Additionally, almost three-quarters of the farmers and ranchers operating in the Southern AZ food system can be characterized as microentrepreneurs, having annual sales of $10,000 or less, which in total equals less than $3 million in annual sales (Meter, 2011). There are no less than 22 farmers’ markets and at least four community support agriculture shares that routinely operate within Southern AZ. Tucson, the urban center of the Southern AZ food system, is a United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) City of Gastronomy (see https://en.unesco.org/creative-cities/creative-cities-map). This designation is based on the culinary distinctiveness and rich agriculture and food traditions of the city and the surrounding geographic basin. The rich agricultural history, evident localized elements of production, and established recognition of gastronomical culture and practices justifies our selection of this local food system.

Case sampling

Data are garnered from five farmers’ markets and five supermarkets in Southern AZ (see Table 2). Using a maximum variation strategy (Patton, 2002), we include cases of different sizes and in areas with wide ranging household income levels as indicated by 2017 U.S. Census data. Purposeful selection enhances our capacity to capture the diversity in the patterns of how visual cues at points of purchase reference one or more of the local food movement value narratives within and between the 10 cases. As we indicate in the introduction section, the parameters of ‘local’ are subjective and vary by perspective (Mount, 2012; Trivette, 2015). Thus, we do not retain a firm boundary around what is/is not considered ‘local.’ Instead, we are attentive to how ‘local’ is represented within each type of retail site. We assign each location with a pseudonym to protect the anonymity of each of the included farmers’ markets and supermarkets.

Data

Our data originate from four primary sources: marketer interviews, direct observations, photographs of point-of-purchase displays, and collateral materials. We focus on the resulting data to map the multiple modes and intertextuality (as detailed in the data analysis sub-section) of narrative delivery: verbal scripting, point-of-purchase displays, and collateral material referenced and accessed at the point of purchase or within the verbal scripting. We consider the interplay of these modes to be intertextual, composing a “mosaic” (Orr 2010) of the local food narrative expression in and across the Southern AZ food system.

Marketer interviews

We conducted 33 in-depth interviews that span all 10 cases. The interviewee selection criteria include: selling locally-produced or -sourced foods at one (or more) of the five farmers’ markets, managing one of the said farmers’ markets, or managing the produce section of one of the five supermarkets. We use a semi-structured interview protocol (Miles & Huberman, 1994) to probe the meanings and value narratives the marketers associate with local food, as well as the visual strategies they use to represent and convey said meanings and value narratives. The participant sample includes 28 local food microentrepreneurs and five supermarket produce managers (see Table 3). We use pseudonyms to protect interviewee anonymity.

Observation

Our field work involves more than 100 h of direct observation that span all 10 cases with close attention being on the visual representations and cues that signal the presence and
| Retail Site Pseudonym | Retail Site Description | Setting SES | Local Food Movement Code Frequencies | Other Visual Element Code Frequencies |
|-----------------------|-------------------------|-------------|-------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| SUPERMARKET1          | A SUPERMARKET known for selling “natural” foods and limited processed foods, has the highest price range of the 5 stores. Consumer base is upper class | High SES: Income is $72,000 – 100,000+ (US Census Bureau) | ACT: 0% LECID: 0% SC: 0% ENV: 0% HW: 5% | AES: 5% MAR: 90% |
| SUPERMARKET2          | A SUPERMARKET that brands as a “lifestyle” SUPERMARKET, has private line of organic food. Consumer base is middle class | Middle SES: Income is $32,000–50,000 (US Census Bureau) | ACT: 0% LECID: 0% SC: 0% ENV: 0% HW: 0% | AES: 0% MAR: 100% |
| SUPERMARKET3          | A SUPERMARKET that competes with dollar stores and other SUPERMARKETs. Consumer base is lower/middle class | Lower SES: Income is $7,000—25,000 (US Census Bureau) | ACT: 0% LECID: 0% SC: 0% ENV: 0% HW: 50% | AES: 0% MAR: 50% |
| SUPERMARKET4          | A bilingual SUPERMARKET that also carries many cultural foods. Consumer base is lower class | Lower SES: Income is $7,000—25,000 (US Census Bureau) | ACT: 0% LECID: 0% SC: 16% ENV: 0% HW: 0% | AES: 16% MAR: 83% |
| SUPERMARKET5          | A SUPERMARKET carrying convenience-store items along with produce. Consumer base is middle class and students | Mixed SES: Income is $7,000–100,000+ | ACT: 0% LECID: 0% SC: 0% ENV: 0% HW: 0% | AES: 0% MAR: 100% |
| FARMERS’ MARKET1      | Describes themselves as a “European-style market selling local food, arts, wellness and shopping”. Consumer base is upper class. Not a producer-only market | High SES: Income is $72,000 – 100,000+ (US Census Bureau) | ACT: 1.5% LECID: 4% SC: 15% ENV: 3% HW: 28% | AES: 59% MAR: 18% |
| FARMERS’ MARKET2      | The city’s largest Farmers’ market, offers signs for local producers to use to distinguish between non-local producers. Consumer base is middle class. Not a producer-only market | Middle SES: Income is $32,000–50,000 (US Census Bureau) | ACT: 0% LECID: 5% SC: 12% ENV: 6% HW: 34% | AES: 13% MAR: 53% |
| FARMERS’ MARKET3      | A non-profit organization using a FARMERS’ MARKET to support producers, community and conservation. Accept WIC as payment for produce. Consumer base is middle/ lower class. Not a producer-only market | Mixed SES: Income is $7,000–100,000+ | ACT: 0% LECID: 4% SC: 0% ENV: 0% HW 10% | AES: 69.5% MAR: 13% |
meaning of product ‘localness.’ Observations richly depict the atmospheres (e.g., ambiance, architecture, background music, concurrent cultural activities, and events), mixes of foods being visually represented as local versus not, and other types of non-food products being sold alongside the food products being represented as ‘local.’

Photographs

Echoing Schroeder (2002: 3): “[w]e live in a visual information culture,” visual cues within markets are important tools for continually creating, re-creating, and conveying value (Arning, 2018; Kozinets & Belk, 2006). Accordingly, we conduct “hand-crafted, organic” visual analysis (Lawes, 2018: 587) using 711 original, still photographs (“field photographs”) taken of local food representations over the duration of our study. We treat our photos “as empirical evidence… [and] documentations of observable and confirmable social phenomena that can be captured, theorized, systematically analyzed, and revisited over time” (Harper, 2015: 144). Photographed images, especially those taken by the researchers themselves (Peñaloza, 1999), enhance systematic and layered analysis that transcends the “socially desirable reactions, idealized or brushed up views” (Pauwels, 2010: 575).

Collateral materials

Lastly, we collected collateral materials to further enrich and strengthen the trustworthiness of our analysis. These materials include brochures and web resources that are integrated with the verbal scripts and point of purchase displays of local food in farmers’ markets and supermarkets. In short, these materials provide narrative content that local food marketers can draw upon to convey value narratives.

Intertextual data analysis

We deductively and inductively analyze the data that together span the three modes of narrative representation: verbal scripts, point of purchase displays of local food in farmers’ markets and supermarkets, and collateral material messaging. Deductively, we rely on a structured coding framework (Miles & Huberman, 1994) composed of theoretical constructs that account for the blended elements that shape the local food movement logic and convey value narratives of local food (Mars & Schau, 2017) (see Table 4 deductive code key). Inductive analysis is included in every analytical stage to reveal any insights relevant to our research questions, but not otherwise uncovered deductively (Corbin & Strauss, 2015).

We iteratively analyze data across types to trace multiple value narratives across intertextual instantiations.
| Interviewee Pseudonym | Role                                      |
|----------------------|------------------------------------------|
| Cecilia              | Local-sourcing salsa maker and FARMERS’ MARKET purveyor |
| Charlene             | Local-sourcing baker and FARMERS’ MARKET purveyor |
| Zeke                 | Local-sourcing honey and FARMERS’ MARKET purveyor |
| Martha               | Local-sourcing jams and FARMERS’ MARKET purveyor |
| Monty                | Local-sourcing hummus and FARMERS’ MARKET purveyor |
| Charlie              | Produce farmer and FARMERS’ MARKET purveyor |
| Pilar                | Produce farmer and FARMERS’ MARKET purveyor |
| Fred                 | Produce farmer and FARMERS’ MARKET purveyor |
| Larry                | Produce Farmer and FARMERS’ MARKET purveyor |
| Pete                 | Produce Farmer and FARMERS’ MARKET purveyor |
| Freddie              | Produce Farmer and FARMERS’ MARKET purveyor |
| Omar                 | Produce Farmer and FARMERS’ MARKET purveyor |
| Doug                 | Produce Farmer and FARMERS’ MARKET purveyor |
| Juan                 | Produce Farmer and FARMERS’ MARKET purveyor |
| Cedric               | Produce Farmer and FARMERS’ MARKET purveyor |
| Oscar                | Produce Farmer and FARMERS’ MARKET purveyor |
| Angel                | Produce Farmer and FARMERS’ MARKET purveyor |
| Tony                 | Produce Farmer and FARMERS’ MARKET purveyor |
| Luna                 | Produce Farmer and FARMERS’ MARKET purveyor |
| Justin               | Produce farmer and FARMERS’ MARKET purveyor |
| George               | Egg farmer and FARMERS’ MARKET purveyor   |
| Suleiman             | FARMERS’ MARKET manager (organizer)       |
| Delores              | FARMERS’ MARKET manager (organizer)       |
| Joyce                | FARMERS’ MARKET manager (organizer)       |
| Tim                  | FARMERS’ MARKET manager (organizer)       |
| Thomas               | FARMERS’ MARKET manager (organizer)       |
| Malcolm              | SUPERMARKET produce manager              |
| Nathan               | SUPERMARKET produce manager              |
| Sylvia               | SUPERMARKET produce manager              |
| Ted                  | SUPERMARKET produce manager              |
| Hector               | SUPERMARKET produce manager              |

| Codes                          | Identifying Features                                                                 |
|--------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| LOCAL FOOD MOVEMENT Elements   | Visual indication of policy or social justice advocation or alliance with an ideology |
| Activist (ACT)                 | Visual indication that the product or purchase of the product benefits the local economy and community development efforts |
| Local Economic and Community Development (LECD) | Visual indication that the product or purchase of the product benefits the environment |
| Environmental (ENV)            | Visual indication that the product or purchase of the product benefits the environment |
| Health & Wellness (HW)         | Visual indication that the product is labelled as healthy or aids in health and wellness |
| Socio-cultural (SC)            | Visual indication the product is labeled in association with local cultural traditions and heritage |
| Other Visual Elements          | Visual indication of flavor profile and/or visual appeal amplification; Inclusion of handmade specialty items in association with or in the proximity of foods identified as ‘local’ |
| Aesthetic Features (AES)       | No visual indication of LOCAL FOOD MOVEMENT elements associated with or in the proximity of foods identified as ‘local’ |
Intertextuality “refers to the way that the meanings of any one discursive image or text depend not only on that one text or image, but also on the meanings carried by other images and texts” (Rose, 2007: 142). Figure 1 illustrates our application of our structured visual analysis/coding scheme on photographic data.

Our multi-stage analytical approach is designed to systematically reveal and refine salient patterns and themes associated with local food value narratives within and across each of the 10 cases (see Fig. 2). All insights generated throughout the analytical process are captured in memo format (Strauss, 1987).

This staged analytical approach enables us to gain a comprehensive understanding of the value narratives that the local food marketers intend to convey within and between the individual farmers’ markets and supermarkets (Gill, 2000; Rose, 2007). Through a copious comparison across data sources (intertextuality), we are better able to analyze the relations between the parts of visual discourse (or discursive formation) (Foucault, 1972) of local food within the local food system and by extension the broader local food movement. Our identification and deconstruction of intertextuality patterns ultimately inform our conceptualization of our three central narrative themes. In Fig. 3a and b, we
demonstrate how we applied the coding scheme in Fig. 1 across data sources.

While our findings are confined to a single local food system, we take steps to increase the transferability of our findings (Creswell, 2013; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Specifically, our analytical strategy includes two approaches to triangulation: (1) data triangulation involving us comparing data from all four previously described sources and (2) researcher triangulation involving us routinely debriefing and discussing our individual interpretations of the data, confirming consistencies, and reconciling inconsistencies (Strauss, 1987).

![Fig. 1 A Intertextual coding examples B Intertextual coding examples](image-url)
Findings

We find that retail environments in which consumers browse and buy food products claiming to be and/or staged as ‘local,’ are the primary sites for value narrative curation and stewardship. Once the microentrepreneurs and marketers have assembled the bases of their value narratives (narrative curation), they turn to narrative stewardship strategies manifesting in a continuum from promotion to neglect. If the value narratives are weakly promoted or neglected then there is potential for narrative appropriation in the forms of voicing, diluting, or replacing narratives for commercial gain. Value narrative appropriation can result in new value narratives that are stewarded in ways that completely overshadow and altogether displace the values that motivated a movement in the first place. Please see Fig. 4 entitled, Narrative use in the marketplace.

Currently, there are technically no sources external to the markets that directly monitor and promote (coordinated curation) the local food movement within the examined local food system. Five years ago, a magazine devoted to food and cuisine dedicated pages in every edition to critiquing the local food movement within the examined local food system. Five years ago, a magazine devoted to food and cuisine dedicated pages in every edition to critiquing the local food movement within the examined local food system.
a former editor of the magazine concisely describes the prior importance of the magazine in narrative stewardship when saying, “We [magazine] tell the stories that make it clear to people why local food is good for our [local] community, economy, and environment.” While people within the local food system can utilize regional, national, and/or global content on the grander macro institutional logics of the local food movement, the genuinely local (intra-local food system) narrative is mostly expressed in the immediate market (e.g., farmers’ markets and supermarkets). An example is a sign or poster hanging at a farmers’ market enumerating elemental logics of the local food movement value narrative and/or service scripts from which the marketer imparts to consumers a value narrative consistent with the local food movement agenda. However, when produce grown hundreds of miles away is labeled ‘local’ at a supermarket (e.g., Image A in Fig. 5 is of navel oranges grown in the United States and outside of the local food system included in the local produce marketplace).
section of a supermarket), the value narrative is inconsistent with the local food movement agenda and undermines the local food movement values. Considering the intended resistance of the local food movement is in part dependent on the market category level literacy of consumers (Viswanathan et al., 2008), clearly, purposefully, and judiciously stewarding value narratives is critical to its success. Figures 5 and 6 illustrate photographic examples of local food and the conveying of the local food value narrative as seen throughout the market sites included in our study.

**Narrative stewardship**

Narrative stewardship is entrepreneurs and marketers strategically using existing or incumbent institutional logics in a given market. The two broad categories of value narratives existing in the local food market are the singular dominant commercial market logic and the amalgam local food movement logic. The data show that narrative stewardship is a continuum from narrative promotion to narrative neglect. We are careful to note that all value narratives are both curated and stewarded with approaches pursued involving various degrees of promotion to neglect. Along this continuum low levels of promotion to full neglect bring increased threats of appropriation, which as illustrated further in the paper (and indicated in Fig. 4) can range from voidance to dilution to replacement.

**Narrative promotion**

**Market value narrative promotion in supermarkets** The central force driving local food activities in all five of the supermarkets is a dominant market logic. Indeed, the produce managers have little understanding and even less commitment to the non-market elements of the local food movement values narratives. ‘Local’ is viewed as a marketing opportunity with little to no value beyond consumer willingness to pay more for ‘it’ with the value of ‘it’ being left to their individual beliefs and values. Ted, a supermarket produce manager, acknowledges the lack of intent and strategy behind the ways in which so-called local products are visually presented when saying, “I don’t know why the consumers want local but they do.” Further, supermarket produce manager comments within the narrative appropriation sections below also demonstrate that market logic elements (e.g., consumer demand, premium prices) are the chief supermarket concerns. Like the farmers’ markets, none of the five supermarkets convey a clear, cohesive, consistent value narrative. Yet, the appropriation (and marketization) of the local food movement by the supermarkets is occurring. The supermarkets leverage vague local food value narratives not only because of sophisticated corporate marketing strategies, but because entrepreneurs and marketers in the alternative marketspaces in which the local food movement is most appropriately positioned (i.e., farmers’ markets) are
neglectful of the local food movement value narrative. In other words, narrative neglect by the microentrepreneurs allows the value narrative of “local” to be more freely interpreted and presented by supermarkets, thus undermining the local food movement agenda. We contend this exploitation is the antithesis of good value narrative stewardship.

**Local food movement value narrative promotion in farmers’ markets** The microentrepreneurs are not dismissive of their role in clearly conveying and compellingly promoting the local food movement value narrative. Rather, they generally see themselves as Charlie, a produce farmer, describes as the “front-line voices and engines” of the surrounding local food system. Rose, a goat farmer and purveyor of cheeses, soaps, and lotions, adds greater context to Charlie’s statement when they say, “I definitely see myself as a representation of a large community effort to provide customers with local products that are safer and more sustainable than what they can get at big box stores.” Likewise, Joyce, the organizer of one of the five farmers’ markets, expresses the importance of farmers’ market to the viability and impact of the local food system (and thereby local food movement) when saying, “This is where local farmers, chefs, and foodies of all sorts can come together to support the local economy, promote the health of the community, and protect our beautiful desert.” Each of these microentrepreneurs identify in various ways with the elemental logics that form the guiding amalgam logic and value narrative of the local food movement.

Why then is a clear, consistent visual representation of the local food movement narrative absent across the five farmers’ markets? First, the microentrepreneurs consider interactions with customers as the ideal way to convey how the local food movement value narrative, despite extremely limited time with individual consumers. Justin, a produce farmer, states, “I see myself as not just a farmer, but a teacher, too. I teach my customers about how I am able to grow food that is good for them and good for the soil. Knowing me is knowing my tomatoes!” The microentrepreneurs see live, face-to-face interactions as the primary (if not the only) way to illustrate the local food movement value narrative. We do not dismiss Justin’s perspective, which was similarly shared by other microentrepreneurs. Yet, our fieldnotes reflect that the time a microentrepreneur and consumer interact in the farmers’ market is often under one minute, which is not conducive to a compelling presentation of complexities underlying the local food movement.

Equally challenging, microentrepreneurs often perceive themselves as lacking the resources and strategic perspective needed to create and deliver a consistent and compelling visual narrative. Charlene, who bakes goods made with locally sourced heritage flour, says, “I’d like to find better ways to make it clear why my goodies are smart and responsible choices. I don’t know how to do this and don’t have the extra money to pay someone to do it for me.” George, an egg farmer, confesses, I’ve never thought about how to promote my eggs beyond showing up each week and talking myself and my farm up to customers. I think of advertising as something businesses do. I know how to raise chickens and gather eggs. My creativity pretty much stops there.

Similarly, Cecilia, a salsa maker, says, I know how to find the best ingredients and make even better salsa. I just try to make people remember my salsa by its taste. I wouldn’t even know how begin to do any real marketing. I guess just being at the market and the trust people of in it [farmers’ market] is enough.

In short, the microentrepreneurs generally lack the experience and confidence to strategically engage in marketing concurrent to their production and distribution activities.

A third explanation is the belief that simply participating in a market setting that is, by definition, an alternative to large-scale supermarkets inherently conveys the local food movement value narrative. Thomas, a farmers’ market manager, echoes Cecilia’s belief that the farmers’ market itself communicates the local food movement value narrative, People come to the market and see all the farmers and artisans right here selling the stuff they themselves grow and create. They see all the booths with all kinds of different people walking about from retirees to young families. They smell the food from the food trucks. I think seeing and feeling this experience is enough. It’s an easy sell!

Fred, a produce farmer, shares a similar understanding, I have been here [farmers’ market] for almost eight years. I haven’t changed a thing, I just show up, people buy my vegetables, we talk about why local and all-natural is the right thing to do, and we go about our day. Keeping it simple works for me!

The assumption shared by the microentrepreneurs is that in-person dialogue with customers and the mere presence of alternative market settings inherently conveys a value narrative that is a compelling representation of the local food movement. This assumption, in combination with limited perspective and experience in marketing strategy, evidences value narrative within and across the five farmers’ markets.

Consequently, the local food movement value narrative remains overlooked and under-developed (i.e., neglected), leaving the local food movement vulnerable to mainstream appropriation. The value narrative neglect on the part of
the microentrepreneurs is neither purposeful nor due to a lack of understanding of or buy-in to the local food movement. Rather, a system-level platform for curating a cohesive representation of the values, generalized norms, and intended outcomes of the local food movement is absent across the local food system. The role of such a platform, such as the previously mentioned and now shuttered local food magazine, would not be to govern the market activities of the microentrepreneurs. Instead, the role would be a stake claim to the parameters of what is legitimately ‘local’ and cohesively feature and advocate for the diverse approaches and strategies of local food microentrepreneurs that together form a multivocal expression of the value narratives that represent the local food movement.

Narrative neglect

Farmers’ markets neglecting the local food movement value narrative

Unexpectedly, we find microentrepreneurs infrequently engage in narrative stewardship in via verbal promotion during consumer encounters due to time compression. As farmers’ markets have limited hours, consumer traffic is concentrated with those operating booths often helping several customers at a time, conducting multiple interactions (e.g., information requests, sales, usage inquiries). This leaves little face-to-face market time to convey the local food movement value narrative. Microentrepreneurs are often busy from set up through tear down with little time to meaningfully converse with customers and to educate novice consumers to the local food movement value narrative. As Larry, a small-scale local farmer who sells at several of the farmers’ markets in our local food system, states,

I love talking with customers about my products and how I grow them right here in their own backyard and why that is important to me both personally and economically and how it helps the land stay nourished and verdant. Unfortunately, I am running all the time from sun up to sun down and never seem to have enough time to connect with these people.

Larry laments that his schedule prohibits him from personally conveying the importance of the local food movement to his consumers. As author fieldnotes indicate, “Larry’s enthusiasm for the local food movement is contagious. If he had the time to educate his consumers, they likely would be more engaged in the local food movement” (fieldnotes, November 3, 2018).

Concurrently, we find microentrepreneurs do not formulate visual cues that strongly convey local food movement value narrative. On the contrary, they commonly convey cues reflecting a market logic. For example, Farmers’ Market 2 operates in a middle to high income community with food products consistently being sold under or behind ‘local’ signage, but without visual indication of other value-add elements of the local food movement (see Fig. 6). In this instance, the microentrepreneurs neglect more than promote the local food movement value narrative.

Similarly, Farmers’ Market 4 operates in a historic neighborhood that is home to individuals and families with a mix of low to middle incomes. The community is at the time of our research undergoing an economic revitalization, and consequently gentrification, with several higher end housing complexes going up and art galleries, trendy cafes, and craft breweries opening. As with Farmers’ Market 2, we find that the visual representations of local foods do not routinely reflect local food movement value narratives with products often stacked on tables with no indication, promotion, or celebration of the meaning of ‘localness’ (recall Fig. 6). Overall, the visual cues of the local food movement value narrative used by the microentrepreneurs at these two farmers’ markets are disconnected from and inconsistent with the non-market elements that combine to form the guiding logic of the local food movement. Consequently, the visual cues of the local food value narrative in these markets are implicitly anchored in a market logic. Again, this market shows more narrative neglect than promotion.

Similarly, we find that an aesthetic element has the heaviest influence on the overall visual representation of the local food movement value narrative at Farmers’ Market 1, Farmers’ Market 3, and Farmers’ Market 5. Recall that Fig. 5 contains examples of such aesthetically oriented visual narratives. Moreover, less than half of the approximately 65 booths at Farmers’ Market 1, which operates within a high-income community, carry produce or other food products. Thus, more accessory products (e.g., jewelry, pottery, flowers/non-edible plants) are sold at the market than are local foods. The market itself is aesthetically set up to resemble more of an upscale, outdoor shopping plaza than a farmers’ market to include live musical acts and high-end plaza grounds surrounded by fountains, tile art, and rose gardens. At Farmers’ Market 3, which operates on a working farm located in a middle-income community, only a quarter of the nearly 50 booths carry food products that are visually presented as being local. Produce is the sparsest food-type sold, which is ironic given that the farmers’ market operates on the grounds of a farm. The prevalence of non-food products at the market (e.g., handbags, home goods, paintings, pottery, locale-/region-specific souvenirs), reveal a local market environment that privileges aesthetics over the other more progressive non-market elements of the local food blended logic and the local food movement value narrative. We find a similar aesthetically oriented pattern at Farmers’ Markets 1 and 5. While Farmers’ Market 2 and 4 include more food purveyors, the aesthetic element is similarly prominent with live music and art and craft vendors sporadically positioned.
there are some data that show supermarkets strategically neglect the local food movement logic toward movement value narrative appropriation. In these cases, the supermarkets display local food products with no reference to any specific benefit associated with localness or the amalgam local food movement value narrative.

**Narrative appropriation**

**Supermarkets appropriating local food movement value narrative** We find that the risk of appropriation due to value narrative neglect within and across the farmers’ markets is more than conjecture. While the local food value narrative conveyed across supermarkets is, not surprisingly, heavily dominated by a market logic, we find that supermarkets routinely appropriate the local food movement value narrative in their in-store displays. Specifically, we find three distinct types of narrative appropriation: voidance, dilution, and replacement—all of which are enabled by narrative neglect.

Narrative appropriation through voidance is when products in supermarkets have distinct local origins on their labels or are commonly associated with the region (e.g., nopales, roasted chiles, cactus syrup, local brand tortillas) with no point-of-purchase reference to local at all, entirely ignoring the local food movement value narrative. Narrative appropriation via dilution of local food movement value narrative occurs in two ways: (1) where the term ‘local’ is used with no reference to any specific value narrative encouraging consumers to supply their own value to these products or (2) when vague reference to local food movement values (e.g., healthy, ecological, sustainable) are made in association with no detail or documentation—again inviting consumers to supply their own understanding of the value narrative. Narrative appropriation via replacement occurs in two ways: (1) new articulations of the local food movement value narrative are asserted that redefine local as 100’s of miles further away from the local food system than the typically accepted 250-mile local food radius (Trivette, 2015), or suggest that merely knowing the place of origin of a product somehow makes the food ‘local’ (e.g., Point Reyes, California blue cheese), or (2) when new value narrative elements are offered (e.g., “ fresher,” “all natural,” organic). Supermarkets may engage in multiple forms of narrative appropriation, like when organically grown avocados sourced out of the country are visually presented as ‘local.’

**Supermarket voidance of local food movement value narrative** Supermarket 4, located in a low-income community, is unique as compared to the other four supermarkets in this study because it practices narrative appropriation via voidance. This supermarket carries a range of foods that are distinctly local and, in some cases, culturally significant,
yet includes no point-of-purchase signage that associates these items with a local sense of place and meaning. For example, prickly pear cacti pads (“nopales”), a traditional food source indigenous to the local food system, are sold in the produce section absent any visual indication of local or reference to the dietary and culinary significance of the plant to the region within which the local food system sits. In this instance, the visual narrative of local foods (or lack thereof) undermines the socio-cultural values of the local food movement.

Supermarket dilution of local food movement value narrative via only local We observe narrative dilution throughout the supermarkets in the local food system through a diverse range of foods simply labeled as ‘local’ including bottled water, cooking oils, fruits and produce, honey, olives, sauces and salsas, and tortillas with little (if any) context being provided to indicate how the products are determined to be local and/or represent the local food movement value narrative. Nathan, a supermarket produce manager, says, “By local food, we mean to signal that the food was grown close to the consumer… that we source some produce from regional farmers.” Nathan does not suggest any reason why closeness between grower and consumer creates value beyond it is what consumers demand. Image A in Fig. 6 welcomes customers to the produce section of Supermarket 1 with a sign proclaiming love for local and an endcap stocked with locally brewed beer. We find the visual presentations of the mere notion of ‘local’ in supermarkets to be no more obvious and direct than that which we observe across the farmers’ markets. Consequently, the generic use of the term ‘local’ with little to no context leaves open across markets an incomplete narrative ready to be filled-in by individual consumers with whatever meaning or value they apply to the ubiquitous, yet nebulous notion of ‘local.’

The strategy behind the deployment of non-descript value narratives of local in supermarkets involves consciously, yet somewhat haphazardly leveraging the lack of coherent meaning and universal understanding of the local food movement value narrative. Ted, a supermarket produce manager, confesses, “we just write ‘local’ on the chalkboard signs, and they buy it as fast as we stock it.” In other words, the local value narrative begins and ends with clear (but poorly understood) consumer demand and thus requires no additional visual badging or storytelling. Sylvia, another supermarket produce manager, amplifies the influence of such consumer demand when indicating the driver of sourcing credible local food is not the non-market elements of the local food movement value narrative, but rather the connoisseurship of locally seeking consumers.

We offer local produce. Our clients demand it. … by local I literally buy it from regional growers. I know [box store competitor] sells local and it isn’t… not even close. In fact, a lot of [high end supermarket competitor] stock isn’t really local. My clients will know the difference. I know the local growers and I buy from them season after season. … It sells immediately. I can’t get as much as I want on shelf. I’m always on the hunt for some good local growers to stock.

Overall, the supermarket managers rely on the local connoisseurship of consumers to sell the products labeled as local rather than create visual devices that convey a local food movement value narrative that would otherwise drive and expand local consumption.

Supermarket dilution of local food movement value narrative via local and vague value narratives There is some evidence that suggests produce managers at supermarkets give some thought to local value narratives beyond increased sales and revenues. Hector, a supermarket produce manager and only supermarket representative who directly expresses an understanding and appreciation for the local food movement value narrative. Specifically, they lament the restrictions of their current supermarket employer places on the ability to source locally grown produce when saying,

Honestly, we have a little latitude in the produce department to source locally and I use it to its fullest. I have relationships with local growers here in the county and that is what is labeled local. … For me it is important to support the community. … I used to work for [supermarket competitor in low-income neighborhood] and I guess I bring with me that sense of community and that responsibility for the community.

The value Hector places on local food production and consumption is an individual perspective that is clearly not shared by their employer, yet Hector adds point-of-purchase displays that say “Local supports community farmers” because he is granted some “latitude” to do so.

Recall that Image B in Fig. 5 shows an in-store display that links produce to scholarships, school funding, dental services, and tree planting. The sign says “sourced for good” which is a common local food movement tagline, used here by a supermarket to say that consumption of these bananas helps a community – just not the local community. In this way, the local food movement value narrative is appropriated and diluted with the supermarket commanding premium prices for the bananas.

Supermarket value narrative replacement: Redefining local in value narratives Narrative appropriation through replacement of local food movement value narrative definitional
parameters with supermarket-imposed definitions is common across the local food system. Sylvia, a supermarket produce manager, demonstrates,

Here, we have a mandate to offer locally sourced produce. Our consumers expect... and demand it... When we label food local, we mean that it was not grown in an industrial setting... and that it is generally grown within 300 miles or so of the store.

Sylvia reveals market logic is central to her supermarket offering local products: “consumers expect and demand” local food. She also offers a new, more expansive definition of ‘local.’ In the local food system, food produced or sourced within a 250-mile radius is considered local. Sylvia offers a new definition of local as “300 miles or so” which she later clarifies can be as far as 500 miles away.

Another way to expand the definition of ‘local’ is to assert that if a discrete origin of the food is known and featured, that product is implied to be ‘local,’ regardless of how distant the origin. Within the supermarkets’ produce sections, items are labeled with indications of origin like country or state (most of which are not the home state of this particular local food system) within which the produce was grown—recall, for example, Image C in Fig. 6 shows organic sweet potatoes labeled “Grown in the USA” next to organic squashes labeled “Grown in Mexico” and blue cheese from Point Reyes California (900 miles away from the local food system) – all in a common section that is broadly labeled as being ‘local.’

Sometimes supermarkets use local food movement conventions to reference specific farms by name and in doing so underscore the microentrepreneurial qualities of the endeavor. Supermarkets use the same appropriation strategy when naming store brands with names like “Hobart Farms” on the stacked produce displays to signal provenance of the produce. Like the above where the origin is stated to mimic the local food movement values of known provenance (a named farm), likely emanating from industrial farms, the naming strategy is designed to suggest a specific origin.

Supermarket value narrative replacement: new local value narratives Narrative appropriation through replacement can happen if new value narratives are added to local food. Image E of Fig. 5 shows a point-of-purchase sign that includes the following quote from the founder of the company making the product (tortillas): “We believe that as you nourish the body, you nourish the body and soul. That’s why our products are made with LOVE, and simple ingredients.” In this example, the local food value narrative includes references to the health and wellness values of the local food movement as well as to love and simplicity. This labeling does not offer explanation for what “LOVE” and “simple ingredients” are nor what makes these factors relevant to local food. The pervasive absence and inconsistencies of local food movement value narrative for products labeled ‘local’ indicates the dominance of the market logic and the opportunistic appropriation of local food narratives conveyed across the supermarket aisles, bins, and shelves. Nathan, a supermarket produce manager, describes using just the local label, “Yes, I have some local growers that I buy from. It’s good for business. We have high-end shoppers who want and expect organic, non-GMO, local, etc.” We note that Nathan vaguely links local with the value narratives outside of the local food movement—i.e., organic and non-GMO foods. And, although Nathan buys local and labels it local, it is first because it is “good for business” and is responsive high-end consumer demand which suggests ‘local’ commands premium prices–whatever ‘local’ may be or mean to consumers. In short, marketers report their explicit use of value narratives toward fueling market demand through supermarket managers highlighting through visual narrative strategies. Returning to Fig. 4, it is such strategies that threaten the complete appropriation and replacement of the local food movement value narrative with a market-dominated one that is strategically controlled and promoted by the very mainstream firms the movement aimed to counter.

Findings summary

We contend that institutional logics are scaffolded by narratives (Thornton et al., 2012) that convey their systemic meanings. We further identify value narratives as the market-facing expressions of institutional logics. We assert that logics and value narratives are inextricably intertwined, and logics offer macro narratives that when strategically curated and fostered inform meso level value narratives. Perhaps most significant to our contribution is that value narratives are dependent on strategic stewardship. Our data show local food microentrepreneurs and market managers are more likely to (unintentionally) engage in value narrative neglect rather than stewardship premised on value narrative promotion. When value narratives are neglected, their meanings are obscured, and they are left vulnerable to appropriation. We focus specific attention on visual cues at points-of-purchase that reference (or fail to reference) the local food movement value narrative within and across the farmers’ markets and supermarkets because these visuals are more consistent across encounters than the marketers’ service scripts or opportunistic (and hurried) conversations with customers. Our visual analysis of point-of-purchase displays and marketers’ quotes show the hazards of value narrative neglect and prevalence of narrative appropriation in this local food system. We show that neglect rather
that promotional stewardship of the local food movement value narrative within the local food system allows for the meaning of local food to become unmoored from the movement agenda. Our data show that supermarkets use the label ‘local’ to meet consumer demand and achieve higher margins than corporate produce. In doing so, we argue that supermarkets are leveraging the lack of precise value narratives in the farmers’ markets, thus voiding, diluting, and in some instances replacing the local food movement value narrative. Recalling Fig. 4, these instances of voidance, dilution, and replacement are themselves a form of narrative stewardship that work against and in extreme circumstances as substitutes for the original value narrative to emerge from local food movement and its amalgam of resistance logic elements.

Discussion

Theoretical contributions

Narrative stewardship importance revealed through narrative neglect

Our analysis indicates that there is little orchestration in the promotion of the local food movement value narrative within and between the five farmers’ markets. On one hand, we find across the visual cues of value narratives conveyed by the microentrepreneurs multiple standalone instances of each of the various amalgam elemental logics converging to form the hybrid logic that guides the local food movement value narrative. On the other hand, we find no consistent value narrative stewardship strategy across the local food system, which leads us to assert that a gap exists in which the local food movement value narrative is reliant on interpretation and vulnerable to mainstream appropriation by retailers within the global food system (e.g., supermarkets). Recall our previous notation regarding the shuffling of the local food magazine within the focal local food system. This magazine was the closest third-party entity with some capacity to curate and cohesively convey the local food movement value narrative in the local food system. We contend farmers’ markets are, as the principal market platforms for the local food movement, the next closest mechanism of value narrative curation and system-level stewardship. Yet, the variations between microentrepreneurs within each farmers’ market, indeed between markets, makes inter-market curation and stewardship impractical and unlikely. Nonetheless, the void in system-level curation of a multivocal representation and expression of the local food movement values and intentions leaves movement narrative vulnerable to appropriation in ways inconsistent with, if not in contradiction to, the underlying resistance agenda.

Our analysis indicates that there is surprisingly little variation in how foods are visually presented as being ‘local’ within and across farmers’ markets and supermarkets. This is particularly important to the local food movement agenda considering the visual representations of value narratives conveyed by marketers are known to directly influence the legitimation of the products (Bettman & Sujan, 1987; Giesler, 2008, 2012; Grewal et al., 1994; Maheswaran & Meyers-Levy, 1990). Like the Huff et al. (2021) study in which they demonstrate how cannabis products are (de)politicized and legitimized through marketer efforts to emulate mainstream markets, our findings indicate farmers’ markets visually mimic the messaging and merchandizing strategies of the market value narrative utilized by supermarkets. This mimicry is in direct opposition to purposefully claiming and reinforcing the resistance agenda and value narrative of the local food movement. We find that aesthetic cues have the most consistent influence over how food products are visually presented as being ‘local’ within both the retail site-types. We note the aesthetics range from the amplification of gustatory qualities (i.e., taste) to the visual flanking of products with props that signal various pleasures through consumption (e.g., sense of unique or intense experiences). Surprisingly, however, the activist, community, ecological, and socio-cultural representations of the local food movement value narrative all have in various combinations only minimal bearing on how local food production is conveyed across the five farmers’ markets.

We find microentrepreneurs are more likely to assimilate to the market logic that dominates the supermarkets than they are to consistently and meaningfully promote the elements that blend into the local food movement resistance agenda and inform its overarching value narrative. Consistent with Baker et al. (1994) demonstration that retail environments shape perceptions of quality, microentrepreneurs appear to be claiming relevancy within a dominant retail context rather than enticing consumers via the advancement of a distinct local food value narrative that creates, “new consensus through a deliberate, stepwise process that garners incremental agreements and commitments from consumers” (Thompson & Coskuner-Balli, 2007a: 147). Thus, value narrative neglect by microentrepreneurs leaves the local food movement value narrative vulnerable to expropriation and assimilation with the dominant mainstream market narrative (Dahlén et al., 2009).

Value narratives, verbal or visual, can be powerful devices for transporting consumers from the confines of the rationalized global economy to more enchanting markets that convey more authentic, ethical, intimate, and even righteous, notions of consumption (Thompson & Coskuner-Balli, 2007b). The theoretical notion of narrative transportation is well established across consumption and market-oriented literatures that span the scholarly traditions of literary studies, psychology, and sociology (Escalas, 2007; Fournier, 1998; Stern, 1996; Thompson, 2004; Wang & Calder, 2006). Using...
analytical techniques from literary studies, the capacity of advertising narratives to engage and shape the imagination of consumers in ways that create new and especially persuasive meanings of objects or experiences has been illustrated (Van Laer et al., 2014). According to Green and Brock (2000), narratives can be powerful immersion mechanisms that transport consumers to new realities and belief changes via “emotional reactions, mental imagery, and a loss of access to real-world information” (p. 703). Narrative transportation is multi-faceted with consumers making meaning and decisions regarding available products and experiences by converging the information, imageries, and storylines that originate from various sources and perspectives (Feiereisen et al., 2021). Returning to our study, the transportive power of value narrative strategies are dependent on purposeful value narrative stewardship, specifically, value narrative promotion that evoke a deep and sustainable connection between consumers and the local food movement agenda (Megehee & Woodside, 2010). Without purposeful nurturing, an otherwise potentially provocative value narrative, such as that which conveys the local food movement agenda, is left vulnerable to withering away with little to no impact, or worse yet assimilating into a more dominant and oppressive narrative that transports consumers away from the intended destination—i.e., in the current context food system transformation (Saler, 2006; Thompson & Coskuner-Balli, 2007b).

The degree to which supermarkets are intentionally appropriating the local food movement value narrative through the visual cues used at points-of-purchase to support of their own market success is beyond the scope of our study. Nonetheless, our findings contradict recent studies that indicate farmers’ market producers, purveyors, and organizers are motivated by and focused on advancing the alternative agenda of the local food movement as much as, or more than, they are by the pursuit of their own market successes (Mars & Schau, 2017, 2018). Specifically, the testimonial views and espoused intentions of farmers’ market managers and microentrepreneurs are not compellingly promoted through their merchandizing strategies and retail designs.

**Retail implications**

Our findings speak to the influence and effectiveness of value narrative stewardship across media and market sites. We argue that if consistently told, the local food movement value narrative can create strong inspirations to purchase local foods that allay the brand vulnerability seen in Giesler’s (2012) study of Botox, making it easier to fend off new entrant competitors who do not represent the underlying value and resistance agenda of the local food movement.

Our research cautions consumer movements about value narrative appropriation by demonstrating that even value narratives with considerable demand, if not vigilantly stewarded through active promotion, can be easily appropriated by the mainstream market. We urge more purposeful value narrative stewardship in alternative movements that are like the local food movement (e.g., ethical and green consumption movements), as well as those that more provocatively/implicitly resist mainstream markets and consumption practices (e.g., Burning Man).

**Incumbent institutions**

Incumbent market institutions have advantages over entering institutions due to the establishment of resources, including singular, dominant logics expressed in nearly univocal value narratives, and their formalized integration (McIntosh et al., 2005). New institutional market entrants must establish infrastructure (institutional arrangements) to support their presence (Carson et al., 1999). We show value narratives to be one important resource to this pursuit and highlight their stewardship as a strategic imperative. In our study, supermarkets leverage narrative neglect across the local food movement, catering to demand with premium prices, and creating their own localness value narratives, replete with definitions, standards, and badging (i.e., “local washing”) (Cleveland et al., 2015). This is analogous to the organic food market where independent farmers opposing the lack of sustainability and social justice in dominant industrial agri-business, found value narratives that resonated with a viable consumer segment. This consumer demand for organic products enticed global agri-business to appropriate the organic value narrative and control associated authentication, pricing independent farmers out of the organic segment they originated (DeLind, 2000; Lockeretz, 2007). Because supermarkets are larger and more networked, they may be able to negotiate along mainstream supply chains (growers, producers, and logistics) and across competitors to create guidelines for localness claims that can potentially influence a larger consumer segment than any single local food system or even networks of collaborative local food systems.

However, localness claims are not without risks for supermarkets. Given the scope and competitive landscape, supermarkets may not be able to achieve consensus on localness. Further, savvy consumers may be wary of these claims and actively contest supermarket localness claims, especially as value narrative stewardship takes firmer hold within local food systems and across the local food movement—as we have recommended above. Supermarkets receiving bad press for illegitimate localness claims may face broader crises of consumer confidence and backlash. In this regard, a refined, more synergistic approach of “if you can’t beat them, join them” may evolve between local food movement proponents and mainstream food retail should the value narrative be (re)claimed and intentionally and effectively stewarded.
Resistance movements

Our findings indicate that market movements seeking legitimacy and especially those resisting an incumbent institutional logic are burdened by the intense task of narrative stewardship. In our study, local food marketers, whether microentrepreneurs or market managers/organizers, must vigilantly steward the local food movement value narrative consistently across specialty venues (their home turf). The meaning conveyed through the movement narrative should include information about the benefits of local foods including health and wellness, regional economic impact, heritage preservation, environmental sustainability, and social justice—i.e., the elemental logics that amalgamate to bring meaning and substance to the local food movement resistance agenda and value narrative. The resulting narrative should be articulated in movement-crafted and -endorsed collateral (e.g., brochures, web resources, service scripts, local press) and later assigned visual badges via signs and stickers to identify the benefits at a glance and easily and clearly reinforce the movement’s value narrative. In our context, we recommend that these badges go beyond verifying the purveyor is a farmer (see “Real Famer” banner in Image B of Fig. 5) to incorporate more about how local farmers reflect and support the local food movement agenda (e.g., “keep the local economy strong”).

To increase the legitimacy of a movement, it is recommended that a third-party authority create clear guidelines for what constitutes the value narrative. In our study, the local food movement value narrative and associated visual cues should be vetted by a designated local food system advocate/curator who devises guidelines for what is (and is not) ‘local’ in each system. While these local guidelines could aggregate up to a national or international level in the future, we advocate that initial localness definitions be derived within specific local food systems. These recommendations would help address current value narrative neglect, focusing on active narrative communication (see Fig. 6). We advocate local food systems, and the local food movement, engage in a standards war and (re)claim the authentic voice of ‘local.’

Further, Dietrich and Russell (2021) show how market contestation can reduce the fragility of brands by heightening awareness of strategic opportunities for growth and timely intervention. Likewise, microentrepreneurs and movement marketers can leverage corporate intrusion as a catalyst for creating and conveying strategic narratives that counter corporate claims and thereby use contestation as an opportunity to clarify, protect, and enhance the movement meaning and values. Such strategy relies on purposeful narrative stewardship for neglect leaves this opportunity open to tragedy in the form of movement coopration. We suggest that the market resistance movements, such as the local food movement, steadfastly defend their value narrative, actively and explicitly regulating use of the value narrative and badges that authenticate the products and practices of entrepreneurs and retail sites (e.g., farmers’ markets). In our context, we recommend the local food movement practice value narrative stewardship, promoting and protecting the value narrative within local food systems via badging. These efforts should begin with the publishing localness guidelines in mainstream press to educate a wider set of consumers. The local food movement should then create collateral with side-by-side comparisons of localness claims where elements such as ecofootprint, heritage ties, nutrient density, and economic impact are directly compared across specialty and supermarkets. If supermarkets use the local designation inconsistent with set standards, local food movement leaders and advocates will be better positioned to act more as credible stewards of the movement’s value narrative, whether through counter-market strategies or via more overt resistance (e.g., protests and boycotts).

Future research

We suggest five main opportunities for future research: 1) discover how value narratives are created and identify their constitutive parts, 2) reveal what constitutes an effective value narrative, 3) identify narrative curation and narrative stewarding as distinct and allied market narrative processes, 4) extend understanding of market movements, and 5) engage in visual data use and analysis in market-facing research. First, our study of value narratives as market expressions of institutional logics focuses on the strategic use of existing value narratives (value narrative stewardship). Future research can examine how entrepreneurs and marketers craft value narratives and map the constituent parts of a value narrative. Second, scholars can identify what makes a value narrative effective. Future research can compare the potential impact of value narrative creation as compared to value narrative stewarding. Specifically, what are the pros and cons of creating versus stewarding value narratives, and how does crafting versus leveraging existing value narratives impact marketing strategy? For example, perhaps creating value narratives enables entrepreneurs and marketers to more tightly align multiple value narratives toward upscaling production and service delivery, while value narrative stewarding may reduce the need to message behavioral change, focusing instead on reinforcement messaging. Third, our inquiry begins an academic conversation on narrative curation and narrative stewardship showing that they are two separate and interconnected strategic market processes with significant market consequences. Specifically, we identify that narrative neglect (a counter-productive form of stewardship) can lead to narrative appropriation which has negative market impacts for the entrepreneurs and marketers whose narrative was appropriated. Yet, we do not yet demonstrate potential negative market consequences for those firms that engage in narrative appropriation. For example, in our context it is possible that supermarkets that appropriate the local food movement value narrative may face reputational repercussions if
they are revealed to be unauthentic or ingenuine in their locales claims, potentially risking negative market outcomes (consumer distrust and abandonment). Fourth, we believe our inquiry of the local food movement has insights scholars can extend or deepen with respect to narrative strategies of resistance and narrative stewardship more generally. We advocate that movements leverage their narratives, specifically their value narratives, to impact market conditions, leaving considerable scholarly space for other insights about movements and types of narratives, as well as the interplay among narratives which might expand our understanding of movements and what makes them successful. Lastly, our use of visual data to enables us to illuminate apparent disconnects between local food microentrepreneur representations of value narratives conveyed through visual strategies at the point-of-purchase, may inspire other scholars to move beyond ad hoc visual analysis methodologies. We argue that visual data in conjunction with more established qualitative, has promise for illustrating with finer granularity the complexities associated with the increasing overlap between local food as a movement and local food as a market opportunity. We urge scholars to incorporate visual data more explicitly into the analytical and empirical core of their research designs.

Conclusion

We examine the visual displays of products labeled ‘local’ within and between alternative and mainstream retail market-types in a common local food system and demonstrate what we term value narrative curation and stewardship. We show the strategic use of visual narratives in a contested marketplace. Specifically, we show that an alignment or lack/misalignment of visual cues representing local value narratives at points-of-purchase. We argue that this narrative stewardship occurs along a continuum (promotion-neglect). We show that a lack of system-level coordination and curation over what constitutes local food leaves the local food movement value narrative vulnerable to value narrative appropriation (avoidance, dilution, replacement) by mainstream retailers. We advocate for greater narrative stewardship that, through the strategic incorporation and alignment of core elemental logics (healthfulness, regional economics, environmental sustainability, representation of heritage and social justice), better conveys the local food movement value narrative. Further, we argue that supermarkets with their expansive networks may be able to appropriate localness to realize premium pricing but due to profit imperatives may not be able to marshal broad based agreements and thus risk consumer confidence in the process.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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