



Dueling the consumer-activist dualism: The consumption experiences of modern food activists

ALLISON GRAY*¹,

¹ University of Windsor, 401 Sunset Ave, Windsor, ON N9B 3P4, Canada

* Corresponding author: grayl@uwindsor.ca

Data of the article

First received : 14 June 2017 | Last revision received : 14 November 2017

Accepted : 29 November 2017 | Published online : 29 December 2017

URN: nbn:de:hebis:34-2017110153680

Keywords

food activism, consumer activism, neoliberal ideology, consumer-activist dualism, food politics

Abstract

Consumer-based food activism (CBFA) is increasingly a symbol of modern politics. Through eating, food purchasing, and other consumer behaviours, individuals advocate for social justice causes. However, CBFA is critiqued for being enabled or produced by neoliberal ideologies, which emphasize individuals' market-based positions as consumers over other (activist) roles, effectively diminishing any influence such personal behaviours have on changing broader structural systems. This project is an exploratory study investigating i) the types of food activism food activists are engaged in; ii) whether they experience CBFA as an effective means to cause social change; and iii) if their roles as consumers and activists are conflicting. In other words, this study seeks to ground the theoretical debates involving the ineffectiveness of CBFA and the dualistic consumer-activist identity. An online survey of self-identified contemporary food activists allowed the collection of data using both close-ended and open-ended questions. The results indicate that these food activists understand their roles as consumers as an opportune component of being food activists, while their effectiveness is both enabled and constrained by neoliberal market systems. While other studies investigate CBFA through particular forms such as organic or local food, this project contributes to the literature by recognizing that food activism is not confined to singular forms of CBFA, nor is it utilized to advocate for single food issues. Future research involving CBFA must continue to unpack the complexities involved in contemporary food activists' understandings of CBFA, its effectiveness, and their roles as both consumers and activists, while contemplating the stomach as a political space.

Introduction

Food activists have become a symbol of modern politics. From the lifestyle changes of vegans, locavores, and free-gans, to local rallies raising concern over the safety and corporatization of genetically-modified foods (GMFs), to international bloggers initiating petitions to persuade food industries to alter their products or behaviours, food has entered the political arena of activism from a multitude of directions. Roles concerning citizenship, civic duty, and social justice activism are interacting with roles of consumerism, individual decisions, and lifestyle changes in new and complex ways.

While food has long been recognized as a nexus for the

intersection of public and private spheres (Johnston, 2008; Winson, 1993), and eating noted as a complex behaviour that is both habitual and structuring (Bourdieu, 1984), more recently, food consumerism is understood as a type of privileged entry point into the broader world of social justice issues and associated responsibilities (Barnett, Cloke, Clarke, & Malpass, 2005; Sayer, 2003; Gabriel & Lang, 2005). Even though "for most consumers, the problems and paradoxes of the corporate food system remain a distant abstraction, out of sight and mind, if not stomach" (Belasco, 2007: 252), many modern food activists are embracing their stomachs, and associated eating decisions and practices, as political spaces. That

Citation (APA):

Gray, A. (2017). Dueling the consumer-activist dualism: The consumption experiences of modern food activists. *Future of Food: Journal on Food, Agriculture and Society*, 5(3), 35-45.



is, growing, purchasing, and eating food are recognized as exercises of power.

This has led to an expansion of a specific form of food activism termed 'consumer-based food activism' (CBFA). While there is a whole spectrum of forms of activism involving food products and issues, I focus specifically on CBFA in this paper, characterizing it as a form of activism which aims to connect individual purchasing and/or consuming behaviours with broader social issues. Also defined as 'alternative consumption' (Gabriel & Lang, 2005), 'ethical consumerism' (Hilton, 2003), 'reflexive consumerism' (Bakker & Dagevos, 2012), or 'conservation through consumption' (Johnston, 2008), CBFA involves methods of activism which target changes to consumerism at the individual level, which is argued to be a modern, significant, unprecedented, and even preferred scene for political participation involving social justice matters (Guthman, 2008; Arnould, 2007; Adams & Raisborough, 2010; Schudson, 2007; Bakker & Dagevos, 2012).

Critical perspectives in academia have responded to CBFA in predominately negative ways. Specifically, CBFA is attacked for being ineffective in producing (broader) social change (Allen, 2010; Brower, 2013; DuPuis & Goodman, 2005; Guthman, 2008; Johnston, 2008; Khoo, 2011; Roff, 2006) and for (re)producing a false or unequal hybrid-dualistic understanding of consumption and activism (DuPuis & Goodman, 2005; Johnston, 2008; Bakker & Dagevos, 2012; Johnston & Cairns, 2012; Groszlik, 2016). It is with this academia-driven criticism of individual-level CBFA that this project begins.

In this project, I aim to critically question this CBFA criticism by exploring contemporary food activists' understandings of the (in)effectiveness of CBFA and how they experience the consumer-activist dualism within CBFA. The point of this research is to compare the practical-based experiences of food activists using consumer-based methods with the theoretical-based understandings of CBFA. In other words, I seek to contrast the opinions within academia with those of individuals within the general population. To accomplish this, there are three main objectives emanating from this question. First, I explore and compare the types of food activism, the share of food activism which utilizes CBFA, and justifications for food activism. Second, given the negative critique within the literature of the ineffectiveness of consumer-activism, I investigate if food activists share this understanding. Finally, I aim to identify if food activists experience the consumer-activist dualism as roles in tension or as complementary.

To accomplish these objectives, this paper will be structured as follows. First, I review recent literature involving

the critique of consumer-based activism as being ineffective, and outline the consumer-activist dualism and its social construction. Next, I outline the project methods, including survey construction, participants, data collection, and analysis processes. After this, I summarize the findings of the survey, organized by the main objectives of the project. I finish with a brief discussion of the results, and offer the limitations of the study along with areas for future research.

Literature Review

Although not solely a recent phenomenon, the increasing domination of individual consciousness by a commoditized culture of consumerism increases the probability of political action emerging through consumer roles (Hilton, 2003). In this way, alternative consumption and CBFA is a form of action-at-a-distance, mobilizing a vast quantity of people for a variety of political causes (Barnett, Cloke, Clarke, & Malpass, 2005). In general, CBFA is not akin to social movements, but is more personal, involving episodic individualized decisions within non-conflictual processes (Johnston & Cairns, 2012). There is an ease with which CBFA can be facilitated, whereby consumers are not required to be members of a specific social or cultural community, but can behave in their impersonal environments without obligatory burdens (Lang & Gabriel, 1995). Processes of buying and eating food are experienced as having value beyond that of foods as products, by a recognition of the potential of food and 'eating for change' (Johnston & Cairns, 2012; see also Pietrykowski, 2009).

This shift toward CBFA is (partially) driven by a neoliberal ideology observed (virtually) globally. Within a neoliberal ideology, individuals are grounded in market competition, defined as autonomous and rational, free and responsible, and condemned to the insecurity of persistent management of choice and action (Brown, 2015; Burchell, 1996; Campbell & Sitze, 2013; Cruikshank, 1999; White, 1999). Neoliberalism represents and demands an obligation of freedom (Chandler & Reid, 2016). Individual self-interest – achieved through market competition – is assumed to be the sole life force and focus of human existence and accomplished by means of consumer choice (Hilgers, 2012; Gilbert, 2013; Ventura, 2012). A neoliberal ideology is characterized by a downplaying of government obligation toward (dietary) behaviour and a growing responsibility of individuals (Anderson, 2008; Khoo, 2011), whereby the purchasing of 'good things' is emphasized at the expense of wider questions of sustainability, ethics, and justice (Roff, 2006). For example, the 'locavore' rationale limits addressing social justice to the jurisdiction of altered personal behaviour (DeLind, 2011), and consumer choice is aligned with ideals



of self-improvement, progress, and political freedom (Guthman, 2008; Dauvergne & Lebaron, 2014). Through such behaviours, CBFA is argued to reproduce this neoliberal ideology and its responsabilization of individuals-as-rational-consumers (Brower, 2013; Guthman, 2008).

A fundamental criticism within academic literature is that by promoting a false level of individual agency and by utilizing individual-level practices as the key source of social change, CBFA is ineffective in eliciting (broader) social change (Allen, 2010; Brower, 2013; DuPuis & Goodman, 2005; Guthman, 2008; Johnston, 2008; Khoo, 2011; Roff, 2006). This idea largely stems from a political economy perspective, which highlights the stark structural inequalities prevalent throughout a neoliberal society, which do not adequately enable social justice issues to be rectified through individual choice ideologies and practices (White, 1999; Allen, 2010). Consumerism provides uneven protection to individuals, in which the consumer choices of the poor and disadvantaged are struggles (Johnston & Cairns, 2012), and those who are food insecure or who lack resources are prevented from participating in certain consumption processes (Barta, 2017). Within consumerism, more specific processes, such as 'voting with your dollar', are problematic since they allow the wealthier and those with higher purchasing power to have more votes (Lang & Gabriel, 1995). For instance, WalMart is one of the top organic food distributors; thus, the conscientious consumer is hardly 'sticking it to the man' through organic purchases at these stores (Belasco, 2007). Essentially, over-embracing CBFA comes with the risk of forgetting about the underlying political-economic causes of injustice in food systems and "falling back into the trap of commodity fetishism" (Barta, 2017, p. 30; see also Goss, 2004).

I must clarify here, that this academia-driven criticism of CBFA largely represents a specific (normative) perspective. Such an evaluation is highly critical of neoliberal ideology and the capitalist socio-economic structures it produces, and it critiques social movements and activism forms – such as CBFA – that may not (significantly) oppose neoliberalism or be necessarily anti-capitalist. Of course, individuals and groups who utilize forms of CBFA have various goals for their behaviour that may or may not include transforming the fundamental systems of society, albeit this may be due to those actors not embracing their sociological imaginations and recognizing the connections between the food on their forks and the industrial agricultural processes which produce, process, transport, market, retail, and govern that same food. What is important to note is that CBFA is defined here in terms of its methods, not its objectives, and that CBFA must not be necessarily anti-capitalist or challenging of

neoliberal ideologies.

That being said, the effectiveness of CBFA remains questionable in that its methods are problematic because they are embedded within such capitalist structures. While forms of CBFA have promising targets at the structural level (e.g. shifting towards alternative or oppositional food systems), the consumer-based practices of some food activists are less threatening – if threatening at all – due to lack of abilities and resources (Allen, FitzSimmons, Goodman, & Warner, 2003; Kennedy, Parkins, and Johnston, 2016). According to Zerbe (2014), "these alternatives remain limited by their grounding in broader market relations ... [and] ultimately are limited by the neoliberal model of consumer sovereignty from which they implicitly draw" (p. 87). In other words, consumer-based activism remains victim to commodity-bound relations and can only elicit change that is based around those relations.

However, while the methods that CBFA involves may not produce certain types of change, they may facilitate a higher frequency and quantity of participation. Schudson (2007) argues that at some level, "consumption can create the condition for political action and mobilization" (p. 240) and consumption behaviour cannot be reduced to only self-interested motivations. Further, Arnould (2007) argues that effective citizenship should take place through market-mediated forms because these are the most understood and available forms to the masses – a phenomenon that Schweikhardt and Browne (2001) suggest requires recognizing the markets as a modern political arena. In other words, while consumer activism may not upend capitalist food systems, it does "wield power to shape the food system" (Goodman & Dupuis, 2002: 13). Although academic literature predominately criticizes CBFA for being ineffective in generating systemic change, this does not mean that its methods are wholly powerless, especially if significant quantities of consumers-as-activists simultaneously and successfully utilize CBFA with like-minded goals.

Moreover, academia's criticism of CBFA may be more theory-driven than empirically-founded. The prevalent idea that consumption itself is bad is illogical, as humanity depends on some level of consumption, even if just considering the physiological need to eat food and drink water. Rather, consumption is enigmatic and ambivalent (Bauman, 1990; 2002). Regardless, academia is critical of consumption despite the lack of empirical evidence to ground such a perspective (Warde, 2017). Deconstructing the history and consequences of this is beyond the scope of this paper, but is an important consideration when contextualizing this project and broader questions of CBFA.



Finally, a focal concept within academia is the modern dualistic identity of the citizen-consumer. This hybrid conceptualization combines the roles of consumers and activists to represent the identity of someone employing CBFA. Johnston (2008) argues that the marketplace is filled with individuals defined through a consumer-citizen hybrid, which neoliberal ideology frames as celebrating the citizen role (re: decreased, sustainable, and just consumption) while hiding the fact that the interests of the consumer role (re: individual 'consumer choice' and purchasing power) are actually being served. For example, in the case of organic food consumption in Israel, Groszlik (2016) finds that this 'citizenship-consumerism' dualism is a concept whereby food activists associate organic food consumption with civic meanings, but these values are subordinated by the dominant global individualized neoliberal consumer culture.

The utilization of this dualist concept is not favoured by all. Some argue that the binary language itself harms the potential for social justice within the food system (DuPuis & Goodman, 2005), or that these binaries of citizen-consumer and consumer-activist obscure the possibilities of change (Johnston & Cairns, 2012). Bakker and Dagevos (2012) accuse the dualism as being abstract and artificial, and demand a broader understanding of individuals engaged in various forms of activism. This project seeks to explore how contemporary food activists utilizing CBFA understand and experience this dualism, and whether the two roles are in opposition or somewhat complementary, within the context of a neoliberal food system.

In sum, the critical academic literature argues that CBFA, as an increasingly common form of food activism, is ineffective in eliciting systemic change by working to reproduce contemporary neoliberal food systems, and produces an unequal hybrid identity of food activists using CBFA between their roles as consumers and activists. Academia argues that in this consumer-activist dualism, the former is exalted. This project surveys the understandings of food activists on these two issues. While other research on food activism has dealt with these issues (in part), it has focused on specific forms of CBFA, such as organic consumption (Groszlik, 2016) or eating local (Kennedy, Parkins, and Johnston, 2016). The contribution of this project involves a broader inclusion of food activists who engage with a multitude of food issues and various forms of food activism.

Methods

Data was collected through the distribution of an online survey to enable broader dissemination without high resource commitment. After approval from the Research

and Ethics Board (REB) of the University of Windsor, the survey was distributed through an electronic link posted to consenting food-related social media sites, both academic and entertainment-oriented, the names of which remain confidential in line with REB conditions. The link brought potential participants to a university-secure online survey program. Participants were encouraged to share the link across any relevant social media platform to which they had access, while the link remained active during June 15th to October 15th, 2015. There was no limit on the geographic reach of the survey link. While informal pilot testing, performed by the principle investigator and colleagues, suggested that the survey length was approximately 30 minutes, the majority of the participants who filled out the entire survey took several minutes longer. This is likely due to an underestimation of the depth of thought required to answer many of the questions. Analysis of the uncompleted surveys shows that the majority of partial-participants did not continue the survey shortly after the descriptive and demographic questions which may be simpler or easier to answer than later questions dealing with the challenges, importance, and consequences of food activists' lifestyles and behaviour.

The questions were informed by key concepts, relationships, and questions within the literature. The survey was predominately comprised of close-ended questions, but also included open-ended questions or comment boxes throughout to allow willing participants to provide more detail or explain their choices (see **Table 1** for a more in-depth description of the survey themes). Due to the exploratory nature of this project, many questions were first asked allowing for 'select all that apply' responses, and then followed by a similar question asking for a single response to represent the primary or more common option. The survey also included definitions of key concepts and terms (e.g. food activism, consumer activism, neoliberal ideology, etc.) to yield a more consistent understanding among participants. Respondents were anonymous, and no form of compensation was given for participation.

Analysis of the close-ended questions involved a predominately descriptive strategy, justified by the exploratory nature of the project, produced in SPSS version 22 (IBM Statistics). Analysis of the open-ended questions involved the use of 'versus coding' techniques, whereby the focus was on comparing binaries (e.g. activism is effective versus ineffective; individual as consumer versus activist). The findings of the qualitative questions were then used to exemplify (or provide additional information regarding) the results associated with the quantitative findings. In sum, this study had three objectives:



Table 1: Survey Themes and Information Collected

Food Activist Identity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Age, gender, marital status • Education, employment, income • Effect of identity on activism*
Defining Food Activism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Importance of various food issues • Ranking of various food issues • What does it mean to be a food activist*
Focusing Food Activism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • (Primary) types of activism • Justifications for (primary) types of activism • Justifications for not utilizing other types of activism • Reasons for, and goals of, activism*
Changing the Food System	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If activism produces social change • Type(s) of social change caused by activism • Reason(s) why activism is effective • Influence of food system change on continuing activism*
Barriers in Food Activism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reason(s) why activism is not (more) effective • Ways activism could be more effective • Barriers to activism • Impact on individuals when activism has limited effectiveness*
Politics and Food	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extent that food is political • Social level where food is the most political • How food activism is political*
Forms of Consumer Activism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Importance and effectiveness of 'voting with your dollar' • Importance and effectiveness of 'consumer choice' • Importance and effectiveness of 'altering personal behaviour' • Utilization and value of these forms*
Consumer Activism Effectiveness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If consumer activism is effective • (Primary) reason(s) why consumer activism is effective • (Primary) reason(s) why consumer activism is not effective • If roles of consumer and activist are at odds*
Ideologies and Structures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If neoliberal food systems limit activism • If neoliberal food systems encourage non-consumer activism • If neoliberal food systems encourage consumer activism • If activists can be effective using consumer activism within neoliberal food systems • If neoliberal food systems can effectively change as a result of consumer activism • How consumer activism is discouraged/encouraged in neoliberal food systems*

*Open-ended, qualitative questions

Objective 1: Explore the types of activism utilized by food activists, noting the share of food activism which utilizes CBFA, and justifications for their use.

Objective 2: Investigate if food activists agree with the negative critique of CBFA as being ineffective in creating social change.

Objective 3: Identify if food activists experience the consumer-activist dualism, and if they perceive these roles as complementary or in tension.

Participants in the study were all adults (≥ 18 years old at the time) who self-identify as food activists (i.e. characterized as people putting forth any type of effort toward advocating, promoting, or impeding social, political, economic, or environmental change as it relates to food or the food system). They all had English-reading comprehension and at least temporary access to the Internet, as was required in order to complete the survey. Throughout data collection, 68 individuals accessed the survey, but only 28% of these individuals fully completed the survey. The following analysis only includes those who fully completed the survey ($n = 19$). The age of participants ranged from 23 – 69 years old, with a majority of female respondents (14). Description of the demographics is purposely limited here in order to maintain a level of anonymity, given the small sample size. However, the average participant was White or



Caucasian, married, with no religious or spiritual identity, highly educated (graduate degree), and employed full-time. None of the participants in the final sample volunteered to provide their country of residence. Nearly half (9) of the participants defined themselves as food activists for 10 years or longer.

Findings

The results are presented in three subsections organized around the objectives of the research project. First is a descriptive analysis of the types of issues and forms of activism which food activists deem important and utilize, including their justifications or reasoning for (not) engaging with them. The second theme involves the types of change the sampled food activists perceive that CBFA elicits, reasons for the (in)effectiveness of CBFA, and barriers to engaging in (successful) CBFA. Finally, the third theme examines the relationship between the role of consumer and activist, the experience of the consumer-activist dualism, and the influence of neoliberalism in valuing the former at the expense of the latter.

Experiencing Food Activism

The participants deemed a wide variety of food issues as important, but there was a noticeable thematic difference in what was deemed more important versus less important. The most common food issues ranked as 'more important' by participants were: environmentally conscious production (18), environmentally conscious products (18), and safe food production (17). The food issues most frequently described as 'less important' were food processing worker safety (9), animal rights (9), vegetarianism (9), and veganism (7). This shows that, to some extent, participants consider food issues that concern broader systemic goals or processes more important, while food issues ranked less important involve more individual or lifestyle matters.

Similarly, extra-personal spaces were perceived as sites where food was political more often. All participants agreed that food is a political issue, with the majority believing food to be political most or all of the time (16). However, when asked 'where is food the most political?' the responses indicate a somewhat hierarchical pattern. While 2 participants answered 'everywhere', the most common answer was 'global food systems/global trade' (9), followed by 'national food systems' and 'regional food systems'. Thus, while participants understand food as frequently political, the site of food politics is at-a-distance. The types of food activism that participants engaged in were diverse. In order from most-utilized to least-utilized, the types of food activism were: educating others (19), consumer choice (18), personally grow food (18), lifestyle change – decisions and behaviours relating to

personal lifestyles such as being a locavore, vegetarian, or freegan (15), individual boycotting (14), petitions (13), participating in social movements (10), public demonstration (5), contacting governments (5), and other (4: social media blogging, presentations, donating food, and sharing seeds). The types of food activism that participants were most often engaged in involved efforts at a more personal level, while the participants engaged less in methods which seek to directly modify societal policies or processes. Thus, the participants were utilizing personal-level methods (education, growing own food, consumer choice), but as the previous rankings suggest, the majority of participants deemed extra-personal concerns (environmentally conscious production and products) as more important.

Consistent with this finding, almost half of participants selected 'consumer choice' (8) as their primary type of food activism, followed by personally growing food (4), lifestyle change (2), and educating others (2). The reasons for engaging in these primary forms of activism included personal ability (18), awareness that their primary type of activism is a form of activism (16), and to educate others (14). Reasons for not engaging in other (non-primary) forms of activism were more varied, with 'lack of resources' (7) and 'lack of personal ability' (5) as the top responses. This information suggests that the primary forms of activism were utilized as known means of activism which the participants were able to engage in without significantly impacting their personal resources. While the most common primary forms of activism were at the personal level and the most common form of activism (consumer choice) was consumer-oriented, the second most common form of activism (personally growing food) was not consumer-oriented, but more production-focused.

Consumer-Based Food Activism Effectiveness

The participants perceived that their food activism – defined broadly at this point (re: not only CBFA) – was associated with a broad range of changes at multiple levels. The most common cited change associated with food activism overall was a change in the awareness or education of family and peers (17), closely followed by personal lifestyle change (16), and lifestyle changes in family and peers (15). None of the participants indicated their activism had resulted in no change(s), suggesting confidence in the effectiveness of their behaviour. When asked about the primary change associated with their food activism, the participants overwhelmingly selected personal change (8). The responses that were not selected included: change in awareness or education of non-personal connections, creating debate concerning food policy, and assisting in changing the social morals or ideologies.



Similarly, the primary reason for the effectiveness of general food activism was 'due to personal hard work and effort' (10), followed by 'due to an already changing social environment' (6), while the primary reason for its ineffectiveness was tied between 'lack of personal time or resources' (5) and 'lack of legal policy change' (5). Thus, participants most commonly perceived food activism as effective in producing change in themselves or their family and peers due to personal efforts, while attributing less or no change to systemic-level concerns due to lack of personal resources and policy-level change. This suggests that food activists create change according to their abilities, but are aware that their personal efforts are limited in causing broader social change.

Focusing more specifically on CFBA, the participants believed that it is effective for a range of reasons. Overall, the most common justifications for the effectiveness of CBFA were demand-driven supply processes (food industries produce based on what consumers want to buy) (18), corporate punishment (18), frequency of activism (individuals can do this often) (17), and quantity (many individuals can do this at the same time) (17). The primary reason given for why CBFA is effective was demand-driven supply processes (8), while the primary reason selected for why it is ineffective was differential ability (7), defined as the idea that not all individuals are able to engage in consumer-activism (equally) due to differences in resources and abilities.

An open-ended question asked if participants value and/or practice forms of CBFA, probed with three common examples (consumer choice, altering personal behaviour, and voting with dollars). All participants responded yes in some form (19), most with highly positive things to say about CBFA. For example: 'I believe in it 100 percent'; 'I value [sic] and practice each of these with each decision that I make. I feel that this is one thing that I can consistently do and should do'; 'do my best every day'; 'these are the things I do everyday [sic] and are what I believe most in'. Many participants agreed that 'voting with your dollar is the easiest and most effective way to make change', but some noted its limitations: 'I feel if I had more dollars I'd vote with them more'. These comments support the data from the close-ended questions, which suggests that CBFA is effective at some level (personal) but less effective at other levels (e.g. systemic).

Consumer-Activist in Neoliberal Contexts

The survey included a definition, grounded in the literature, of neoliberal food systems as modern food systems associated with neoliberal ideology, which emphasizes the individual as a rational actor with goals of economic gain in a capitalist structure of privatization and deregulation of markets. After being primed with this defini-

tion, participants were asked 'do neoliberal food systems limit the methods of your activism'? Of the 15 which responded, about one-third answered yes (6) and the remaining answered no (9). To probe further, two additional questions incorporated how neoliberal food systems are linked to non-consumer-based activism versus consumer-based activism. While most participants agree that neoliberal food systems encourage consumer-activism (14 of 16 valid responses), less than half (6 of 15 valid responses) agree that non-CBFA is similarly encouraged.

To collect data specifically on the consumer-activist dualistic roles, participants were asked 'can an individual be an effective activist using consumer practices within a modern neoliberal food system', to which the majority answered yes (12 of 13 valid responses). Qualitative comments by these 12 affirmative participants suggested ways in which this happens: 'buy locally', 'through supply and demand', 'every dollar spent or not sends a message', or 'boycott products'. A key theme involved the prevalence of (consumer) choice as enabling CBFA. For example, 'a neo liberal [sic] food system provides options and choices for the consumer to be able to participate in any type of activism', or 'the system gives the consumer the opportunity to influence supply by his [sic] choices'.

A final open-ended question asked 'is your role as a consumer at odds with your role as a food activist?' Many participants answered no (6 of 15 valid responses) and one acknowledged that 'there is always a clear battle'. However, the remainder (8) acknowledged that this tension happens sometimes. Many noted the key issue perpetuating this tension as the differences in resources and abilities: 'due to convenience', 'it takes sacrifices', or 'limited funds as a consumer limits my ability to "vote with my dollar"'. This suggests that because neoliberal food systems are perceived as encouraging CBFA and facilitating consumer choice, contemporary food activists are not at odds with their roles as consumers, apart from (occasional) resource limitations.

Discussion

The participating self-identified food activists in this project experienced their lifestyles as both activists and consumers, creating change or 'eating for change', in complex ways. While the results cannot be generalized to greater populations, this exploratory study has provided important and stimulating information aiming to critically question the academic criticism of CBFA. The following section is organized according to the three objectives of the study.

The first objective of the study was to describe the importance of different food issues and the use of CBFA



among contemporary food activists. The data shows that these food activists valued structural-level or systemic food issues, while predominately performing forms of activism at the personal-level, such as educating others, using their choices as consumers, or growing their own food. All participants noted that they used some form of CBFA, and the primary form of activism engaged in was 'consumer choice' (a form of CBFA) because these individuals were personally able to perform in this manner compared to other forms of activism which these individuals lacked the resources or abilities to perform. This, combined with the data showing these food activists overwhelming perceived neoliberal food systems as encouraging CBFA, supports Hilton's (2003) argument that a neoliberal culture of commoditized consumerism is increasing the use of consumer roles for political action.

The second objective of the study involved situating contemporary food activists' understandings within the negative critique of CBFA in academic literature as ineffective in causing social change. The data suggests that these food activists highly valued and practiced various forms of CBFA, but were also aware of its limitations. In particular, they were aware of the unequal abilities and differential resources available to food activists engaging in CBFA, which reproduce the balance of power in favour of well-to-do consumers – a finding consistent with many researchers (Lang & Gabriel, 1995; White, 1999; Allen, FitzSimmons, Goodman, & Warner, 2003; Belasco, 2007; Allen, 2010; Johnston & Cairns, 2012; Kennedy, Parkins, & Johnston, 2016; Paddock, 2016).

However, a comparison of the justifications for using any type of food activism, versus using specifically CBFA, shows that while both are limited due to lack of resources and abilities, the primary reasons given for their effectiveness differ. Food activism in general is deemed effective due to personal hard work and effort by individuals, while CBFA is deemed effective because it influences the food system through supply of food driven by consumer demand. In other words, many of these food activists understand CBFA as effective because it is grounded in market relations; as one food activist argued in the final open-ended question, 'we can't influence the political system but the market is ultimately more powerful... I hope'. This supports Schweikhardt and Browne's (2001) argument for recognizing markets as modern political arenas. Due to the ease of access, consumer-based activism is an entry point into politics and agency, where vulnerable populations can find empowerment and achieve social and cultural goals (Brown, 2017).

However, because the types of changes associated with their food activism involved predominately personal-level changes (modifications of their own or peers'

lifestyles or education of family and friends), it is reasonable to continue to criticize CBFA as market-bound and unsuspecting of systemic structures and discourses (Johnston & Cairns, 2012; Zerbe, 2014), as well as a weak expression of 'caring at a distance' by adhering to "an uncritical acceptance of consumption as the primary basis of action" (Bryant & Goodman, 2003: 344). In other words, if activism involves predominately consumption behaviours, this will cultivate a consumer-oriented society and may idolize the role of consumers all of which does not threaten, but rather reproduces the systemic production-consumption power relationships that exist. As the next objective touches on, the dialectical production-consumption relationship cannot be ignored while alternative consumption, such as CBFA, is celebrated (Goss, 2004).

The third objective of the study involved identifying how food activists experience the consumer-activist dualism, and if these roles are complementary or conflicting. The data suggests that while these food activists perceived neoliberal food systems as facilitating consumer choice and CBFA more generally, the roles of consumer and activist are not at strict odds with each other, apart from potential constraints based on differential abilities and resources. However, the explanations provided for why individuals can be effective activists using consumer practices – that is, that the market enables activism by offering consumer choices – suggest that the commodified consumer culture may be hegemonic in scope. In other words, the consumer role is privileged at the expense of the activist or citizenship role (Johnston, 2008; Brown, 2015). There are consequences to this prioritization. For example, labelling food activists' power as consuming or 'shopping' constructs an understanding of these activists which does not recognize or respect their employment of agency within these actions (Brown, 2017).

However, support for this is not straight forward. The majority of participants located 'food politics' at sites at-a-distance from individuals – predominately as global or national food systems. This understanding does not bode well for the individualized consumerism culture. It also brings into the question the argument that food activism is a more intimate and individualized experience (Johnston & Cairns, 2012), as the site of food politics was perceived to be far from the grocery carts and mouths of individuals. This suggests that – for these food activists – consumer roles are not necessarily a veil for more traditional political roles involving citizenship and activism. Rather, being a consumer is a notable and opportune part of being an activist.

Project Evaluation



As with all research projects, this study has limitations. First, the survey itself may have had a role in reproducing the binary language of consumer-activism by separating non-consumeristic food activism from CBFA, which may have impacted the opinions on the potential or possibilities of social change perceived by participants (see DuPuis & Goodman, 2005; Johnston & Cairns, 2012). By using the dualistic concept within the study, the issue of food activism generally, and CBFA specifically, may have been unintentionally oversimplified. Alternatively, the hybrid concept could be researched in ways which recognize that dualisms are complex and nonlinear, such as incorporating the ways in which (food) corporations (re) construct broader nature-culture dualisms which parallel consumer identity and gender dualisms (Irving & Hellen, 2017).

Second, there were methodological limitations. As a convenience sample, there was sampling bias, a non-representative sample, and a high non-completion rate, which means the results cannot and should not represent or be applied to all contemporary food activists' experiences and understandings. This sample excluded potential participants that could not exercise sufficient English comprehension to read and respond to the survey, as well as those whom did not have access to a computer or similar device with access to the Internet.

While it is also important to question how this sample may relate to the broader population of food activists, this is a difficult task without data on the socio-demographics of the food activist population. Research describes the population of social activists beyond food issues as predominately white, female, thin, and part of the middle class (Wrenn, 2016; Heng, 2017). Studies involving media representations of activism involving veganism and the rights of nonhuman animals find a similar typography of activists being over-represented: thin, female, white persons (Harper, 2010). The average demographics from this sample (i.e. female, white, highly educated, and employed full-time) were comparable. However, implying that the population of food activists parallels the population of activists more generally may be problematic. As outlined in the introduction, peoples' relationships with food are extremely intimate and unique-something which many other social justice issues, particularly those involving non-material objects such as climate change or labour rights, lack.

Nonetheless, the contribution of this study is found in its broader definition and inclusion of food issues, food activism forms, and food activists. While other studies focus on particular types of food activism or types of CBFA, this project recognizes that food activism is not confined to singular forms nor utilized to advocate for single food

issues. Additionally, this project critically-questioned the negative criticism of CBFA by academia, despite empirical evidence, by contrasting it with the practical-based experiences of contemporary food activists utilizing CBFA. Albeit in a small way, this project is able to challenge academia's theoretical understanding of CBFA, particularly involving its effectiveness in creating social change and the role of the modern food activist as a hybrid consumer-activist.

Beyond performing more in-depth qualitative research to collect 'thick' descriptions, future research should also seek more representative and larger sample sizes in order take into consideration intervening variables. For example, gender is an important consideration in food activism, since women are much more likely to engage in forms of CBFA, such as boycotting (Klein, Smith, & John, 2014). Additionally, future research should explore any (possible) differences between 'eating' and 'buying food' within both CBFA and more general or traditional forms of food activism. This is especially crucial to the debates surrounding the effectiveness of CBFA, because 'eating' does not necessarily directly result from 'buying food'. In this study, a noteworthy number of participants considered growing personal vegetable gardens or raising 'backyard' livestock as one of their primary forms of food activism. These types of behaviour are not necessarily market-based or involving a fundamental consumer role, but can quite easily still be considered forms of CBFA through 'eating' rather than 'buying'. This is a crucial point of differentiation for future research.

Conclusion

This project was an exploratory study investigating i) the types of food activism food activists are engaged in; ii) whether they experience CBFA as an effective means to cause social change; and iii) if their roles as consumers and activists are conflicting. Data collected from this small sample of self-identified contemporary food activists suggests that CBFA is a commonly-used form of food activism, but not the only form utilized. Additionally, these food activists understood CBFA as an effective means to create change according to their abilities and resources, while being aware that some of these efforts may not cause significant social change, or only bring about smaller, more personal or local instances of change. More specifically, CBFA was believed to be primarily effective because virtually everyone is frequently engaged with markets in which consumers' behaviour can impact the supply-and-demand relationship. However, everyone has differing capacities and (economic) resources, thus this participation is unequal and based on inconsistent fields of possibilities. As a result, rather than perceiving tension between their activist and con-



sumer roles, consumer-based food activists see the market as a welcoming site for (effective) activism regardless of resource-based restrictions, although these food activists also perceive that neoliberal food systems encourage and facilitate CBFA.

Acknowledgements

The author thanks the participants of the survey for their time and perspectives, her supervisor for her numerous forms of assistance, and the editors and anonymous reviewers of the journal for their helpful comments on earlier versions of the manuscript.

Conflict of Interests

The author hereby declares that there are no conflicts of interests.

References

Allen, P. (2010). Realizing justice in local food systems. *Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society*, 3(2), 295-308.

Allen, P., FitzSimmons, M., Goodman, M., & Warner, K. (2003). Shifting plates in the agrifood landscape: The tectonics of alternative agrifood initiatives in California. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 19(1), 61-75.

Anderson, M. (2008). Rights-based food systems and the goals of food systems reform. *Agriculture and Human Values*, 25(4), 593-608.

Arnould, E. (2007). Should consumer citizens escape the market? *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 611(1), 193-204.

Barnett, C., Cloke, P., Clarke, N., & Malpass, A. (2005). Consuming ethics: Articulating the subjects and spaces of ethical consumption. *Antipode*, 37(1), 23-45.

Barta, A. (2017). Habitus in alternative food practice: Exploring the role of cultural capital in two contrasting case studies in Glasgow. *Future of Food Journal*, 5(2), 19-33.

Bauman, Z. (1990). *Thinking sociologically*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Bauman, Z. (2002). *Consuming life*. In *Society under siege* (pp. 180-200). Cambridge: Polity.

Belasco, W. J. (2007). *Appetite for change: How the coun-*

terculture took on the food industry (2nd Ed.). Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Bourdieu, P. (1984). *Distinction: A social critique of the judgement of taste* (R. Nice, Trans.). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. (Original work published 1979)

Brower, A. (2013). Agri-food activism and the imagination of the possible. *New Zealand Sociology*, 28(4), 80-100.

Brown, W. (2015). *Undoing the demos: Neoliberalism's stealth revolution*. New York, NY: Zone Books.

Brown, N. M. (2017). Bridge leadership: Gendered consumerism and Black women's political power within early 20th century "don't buy" campaigns. *Sociological Focus*, 50(3), 1-16.

Bryant, R. L., & Goodman, M. (2003). Consuming narratives: The political ecology of 'alternative' consumption. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 29(3), 344-366.

Burchell, G. (1996). Liberal government and techniques of the self. In A. Barry, T. Osborne, & N. Rose (Eds.) *Foucault and political reason: Liberalism, neo-liberalism and rationalities of government* (pp. 19-36). London: UCL Press.

Campbell, T., & Sitze, A. (Eds.). (2013). *Biopolitics: A reader*. London: Duke University Press.

Chandler, D., & Reid, J. (2016). *The neoliberal subject: Resilience, adaptation and vulnerability*. New York, NY: Rowman & Littlefield.

Cruikshank, B. (1999). *The will to empower: Democratic citizens and other subjects*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Dauvergne, P., & Lebaron, G. (2014). *Protest Inc.: The corporatization of activism*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

DeLind, L. (2011). Are local food and the local food movement taking us where we want to go? Or are we hitching our wagons to the wrong stars? *Agriculture and Human Values*, 28(2), 273-283.

DuPuis, E., & Goodman, D. (2005). Should we go 'home' to eat? Toward a reflexive politics of localism. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 21(3), 359-371.

Gilbert, J. (2013). What kind of thing is 'neoliberalism'? *New Formations*, 80(80-81), 7-22.

Goodman, D., & DuPuis, M. (2002). Knowing food and



- growing food: Beyond the production-consumption debate in the sociology of agriculture. *Sociologia Ruralis: Journal of the European Society for Rural Sociology*, 42(1), 5-22.
- Goss, J. (2004). Geography of consumption I. *Progress in Human Geography*, 28(3), 369-380.
- Groszlik, R. (2016). Citizen-consumer revisited: The cultural meanings of organic food consumption in Israel. *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 17(3), 732-751.
- Guthman, J. (2008). Neoliberalism and the making of food politics in California. *Geoforum*, 39(3), 1171-1183.
- Harper, B. (2010). *Sistah vegan: Food, identity, health, and society: Black female vegans speak*. Brooklyn, NY: Lantern Books.
- Heng, C., & Wing, S. (2017). Aspiring for change: A theory of middle class activism. *Economic Journal*, 127(603), 1318-1347.
- Hilgers, M. (2012). The three anthropological approaches to neoliberalism. *International Social Science Journal* 61(202), 351-364.
- Hilton, M. (2003). *Consumerism in twentieth-century Britain: The search for a historical movement*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Irving, S., & Helin, J. (2017). A world for sale? An ecofeminist reading of sustainable development discourse. *Gender, Work & Organization*, 1(24), 143.
- Johnston, J. (2008). The citizen-consumer hybrid: Ideological tensions and the case of Whole Foods Market. *Theory and Society*, 37(3), 229-270.
- Johnston, J., & K. Cairns. (2012). Eating for change. In R. Mukherjee & S. Banet-Weiser (Eds.) *Commodity activism: Cultural resistance in neoliberal times* (pp. 219-239). New York, NY: New York University Press.
- Khoo, S. (2011). Re-interpreting the citizen consumer: Alternative consumer activism and rights to health and development. *Social Science & Medicine*, 74(1), 14-19.
- Kennedy, E. H., Parkins, J. R., & Johnston, J. (2016). Food activists, consumer strategies, and the democratic imagination: Insights from eat-local movements. *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 0(0), 1-20.
- Klein, J. G., Smith, N. C., & John, A. (2004). Why we boycott: Consumer motivations for boycott participation. *Journal of Marketing*, 68, 92-109.
- Lang, T., & Garbiel, Y. (1995). The consumer as citizen. *Consumer Policy Review*, 5(3), 96.
- Paddock, J. (2016). Positioning food cultures: 'Alternative' food as distinctive consumer practice. *Sociology*, 50(6), 1039-1055.
- Pietrylowski, B. (2009). Political economy of consumer behavior: Contesting consumption. In B. Pietrykowski (Ed.) *Political economy of consumer behaviour* (pp. 143-152). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Roff, R. (2006). Shopping for change? Neoliberalizing activism and the limits to eating non-GMO. *Agriculture and Human Values*, 24(3), 511-522.
- Schudson, M. (2007). Citizens, consumers, and the good society. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 611(1), 236-249.
- Schweikhardt, D., & Browne, W. (2001). Politics by other means: The emergence of a new politics of food in the United States. *Review of Agricultural Economics*, 23(2), 302-318.
- White, M. (1999). Neo-liberalism and the rise of the citizen as consumer. In D. Broad & W. Antony (Eds.) *Citizens or Consumers? Social Policy in a Market Society* (pp. 56-64). Halifax, NS: Fernwood Publishing.
- Wrenn, C. L. (2016). White women wanted? An analysis of gender diversity in social justice magazines. *Societies*, 6(2), 1-18.
- Ventura, P. (2012). *Neoliberal Culture*. Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Limited.
- Zerbe, N. (2014). Exploring the limits of fair trade: The local food movement in the context of late capitalism. In P. Andrée, J. Ayres, M. J. Bosia, & M.-J. Massicotte (Eds.) *Globalization and food sovereignty: Global and local change in the new politics of food* (pp. 84-110). Toronto, ON: University of Toronto