GARETH ROBERTS - PhD RESEARCH PROPOSAL

Food events, 'sustainability imaginaries' and shaping consumer perceptions and behaviour

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TITLE

Reimagining The Transformative Power Of Food Events: Examining the role of systems, policy and networks in enabling food events to shape consumer perceptions and behaviour and improve food system sustainability.

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades multiple challenges have emerged - austerity, popular nationalism, Brexit, the climate and nature emergency, Covid-19, the cost of living crisis, inflation, the war in Ukraine - and these are just the headlines. Amongst all the tragic consequences to people and planet, there is widespread evidence the sustainability, health and fairness of the globalised food system we rely on is in severe crisis. At exactly the same time, there is evidence (and lived experience) of a shift in consumer perceptions and behaviour, leading to increased demand for a changed food system, and direct, collective support for the people and places upon which this system change depends. This changed food system is a more resilient, localised, agroecological food system, and is highly capable of successfully contributing to the challenge of food system sustainability.

As part of the events industry, <u>and</u> as a part of the food system, food events are being profoundly impacted and changed as a consequence of these challenges. As the 2022 events season begins proper, the many people working in and relying on food events to make a living, and the many more consumers who choose to attend, and hope to enjoy, these events, will no doubt be both pessimistic and optimistic in differing terms about how the next few months, and in time, the next few years will come to pass.

Therefore, in the same way I am interested in how global events outside our control can unexpectedly shape the local reality of everyday life, I am profoundly interested to understand how food events, in particular food festivals, farmers markets and agricultural shows can: a) operate as temporary spaces for collective action and agency; b) shape consumer perceptions and behaviour; c) shape the construction of so-called food sustainability 'imaginaries' (Taylor, C. 2004); d) influence the systems, networks and policies we rely on to eat; and e) improve the sustainability of regional food systems.

RESEARCH QUESTION

What role does systems thinking, policy change and organisation networks play when reimagining the transformative power of food festivals, farmers markets and agricultural shows to shape consumer perceptions and behaviour, and to improve regional food system sustainability in Yorkshire and Northern England?

Systems Thinking - Sustainability is a key priority for the event manager (Jones, M. 2010), it is part of industry standard best practice, recognition and award, such as A Greener Festival, and numerous methods for measuring event sustainability are available (Beech 2014). However, there are limitations with these methods (Collins, A. & Cooper, C. 2017) particularly when measuring and managing the more complex and unique characteristics of food events, their relationship with the wider food system and most importantly, their capacity to influence factors that will make the food system more or less sustainable in the future. There are opportunities to build on shifts in consumer perceptions and behaviour (Krzywoszynska, A. 2022), to learn from research conducted during the pandemic, and adopt the systems thinking being practised by the 'local food' sector, which has contributed to the resilience of UK food systems (Driessen, B. 2021 & 2022).

Research Aim - When considering the relationship between food events, food consumer perceptions and behaviour, and the wider food system, there is contemporary research (eg. Noe E. et al 2017) on 'local food' systems, focusing on the SME food and farming enterprise, situated across rural, peri-urban and urban contexts, exploring key terms including 'local', 'organic', 'co-operative' and 'regenerative', and concepts including 'alternative food network', 'short food supply chain', 'values-based food system' and 'sustainable food hub'. There is an opportunity to develop and apply this research to food events, and open up a range of enterprise opportunities, management practices and assessment tools to better understand, measure and manage the environmental, economic and/or social sustainability of food events, to connect food producers with food consumers, and to reassert food events as powerful instruments of food system transformation.

Policy Change - The National Food Strategy, the first independent review of England's food system for 75 years, over 400 pages long, looks at the entire food system, from field to fork. It identifies 14 recommendations "intended to create the kind of food system the people of this country say they want – and need." (Dimbleby, H. 2021). Government has yet to deliver on the promise to respond formally with a White Paper within six months (Hill, J. 2022), whilst post-Brexit policy on trade, agriculture, fisheries and environment is under comprehensive reform (House of Commons Library, 2016), and responsibility for food policy within English government currently involves at least sixteen different departments. (Parsons, K. 2020). Food policy is fundamentally broken, it must be fixed, and both food consumers and food events have an important role to play.

Research Aim - Food policy must change for the food system to change, and this is happening, but this process is slow, complicated and government is struggling. For food policy and therefore food system change to happen successfully, food consumers will have to engage with, understand, support and consent to food policy change, and food policy will have to reflect, and change in broad alignment with food consumers' perceptions and behaviour. Three areas of research are needed to understand: 1) how food events will be impacted by policy changes, 2) how food events can facilitate meaningful participation in policy making and 3) how to design food event-based interventions which translate policy into everyday practice, and transform changes in consumer perception and behaviour into sustainable food system change.

Organisation Networks - Digital information and communications technologies fundamentally shape every aspect of how we live (Castells, 1996; 1997; 1998), including how we produce and consume food. Networks decide access to information, opportunities and power, and define relationships, identity and solidarity (Clark, L. 2006 & 2010). Over fifty places across England have active food partnerships which are members of Sustainable Food Places, including Sheffield, Leeds and York. There are sixty three different food research institutions across the UK (So, A. 2022), including centres at Sheffield Hallam University, University of Sheffield, University of Leeds and University of York. Yorkshire is also home to the Transforming UK Food Systems SPF programmes Healthy Soil, Healthy Food, Healthy People and Fix Our Food. In 2019 Yorkshire farmers produced 14.8% of England's crops and livestock (Defra, 2021), and as activity recovers to pre-Covid-19 levels an annual calendar of hundreds of food events will return to the region - including food festivals, farmers markets and agricultural shows - involving thousands of businesses working together, and attracting millions of people, including domestic and international tourists, who use digital networks extensively as part of their everyday life.

Research Aim: The fragmented and networked nature of the food system makes improving food system sustainability a highly complex challenge. Forming effective multi-stakeholder, cross-sector networks, including food system actors from producers to consumers, has become essential to tackling the food sustainability challenge, particularly in Yorkshire, which has a number of research centres and programmes, a substantial agricultural sector, a vibrant food economy and food events calendar. Research is needed to map these networks, understand the relationships they enable and obstruct, and the impact they have on access to resources, opportunities and influence. A better understanding of networks will allow food system actors to build on existing roles and relationships, connect on shared strategic priorities, connect with and empower food consumers and make the case for coordinated action at local, regional and national levels.
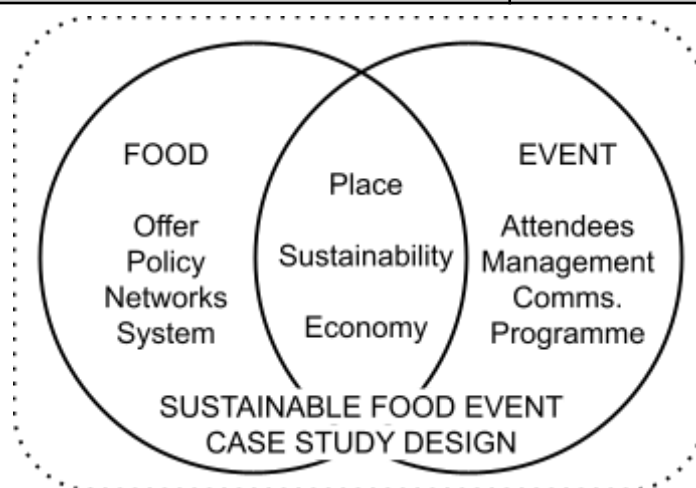
METHODOLOGY

The PhD will build on 20 years of working in the food, events and sustainability sectors, and will make a significant contribution to lifelong personal and professional commitments to strategic event creation, and to improving the sustainability of food systems. The research will be able to draw upon an extensive local, regional and national network of contacts, relationships and organisations, and will benefit from parallel involvement in a range of food sustainability initiatives in Sheffield, in South Yorkshire and across Yorkshire for the duration of the PhD.

Before data collection starts, extensive preparation will be required, including supervision, studying social research methods, literature review, refinement of research questions, research design, investigating the research population, defining criteria to select a research sample, and carrying out a small pilot study. Data collection will focus on attending individual food events to research across a range of 'dimensions' (Table 1), engaging key event stakeholders, including host, manager, staff and attendees, fully experiencing the 'live' event, and understanding the event in terms of location, context, and food policy, networks and systems. Data analysis will produce comparative case studies of food festivals, farmers market and agricultural show food events happening in Yorkshire / North England across multiple years. The research outlined above will inform the co-development of a 'food event-based intervention', as outlined in the project advert, but nothing further is decided at this stage.

Table 1 - Sustainable Food Event Case Study Design V.1

Dimensions	Keywords / Concepts	Data Collection & Analysis
Place	socio-cultural, provenance, geography, host community, legacy, outcomes	local area profile, longitudinal research, eg. focus groups
Sustainability	triple bottom line, balanced scorecard, circularity, integration, natural systems, carbon accounting	adapt / use existing event sustainability assessment tools eg. A Greener Festival
Economy	value, turnover, employment, investment, procurement, local economic impact, multipliers	event accounts / host financial information / local economic data, financial analysis
Attendees	motivations, expectations, demographics, attitudes, identity, meaning, values, behaviour, experience, journey, value co-creation	event attendees survey, follow up with in-depth structured interviews; focus groups, thematic analysis
Comms.	marketing, media, positioning, sponsors, brands, advocacy, platforms, symbolic content,	content analysis of marketing and communication materials
Management	host, manager, stakeholders, strategy, objectives, design, delivery, resources, evaluation	event host & manager survey / interview, event documentation, thematic analysis
Programme	eventscape, activities, attractions, engagement, interaction, physical environment,	observe/record event programme & environment, content analysis
Offer	food choices, menu, pricing, ingredients, access, affordability, safety, nutrition, service, hospitality	food and drink sampling, catering staff survey / interview, thematic analysis
Policy	policy, strategy, evidence, governance, public health, security, local / regional authorities, anchor institutions, food councils / boards	adapt / use existing food policy mapping methods eg. Food Research Collaboration (Wren, G. and Sharpe, R. 2020)
Networks	food partnerships, networks, trade associations, membership & certification bodies, cooperation	create network map, social network analysis (Clark, L. 2006 & 2010)
System	local and regional food system actors, suppliers, logistics, supply chains, values-based food	adapt / use existing relevant food system mapping tools eg. CPRE local food webs

FOOD

Offer
Policy
Networks
System

Place
Sustainability

Economy

EVENT

Attendees
Management
Comms.
Programme

SUSTAINABLE FOOD EVENT
CASE STUDY DESIGN

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