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Co-Creating Value in Sustainable and Alternative Food Networks: The Case of Community Supported Agriculture in New Zealand

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Abstract: Background: Over recent decades, society has been facing different social, political, and economic challenges that are changing classical consumption dynamics towards more sustainable practices, mostly in the field of food consumption. In particular, alternative food networks are enabling new food consumption models inspired by principles of participation and sustainability. The aim of this study was to explore how community supported agriculture farms create value for sustainability practices from both farmer and consumer perspectives in order to find new levers to engage consumers towards pursuing better food consumption models. Methods: A qualitative study was conducted following focused ethnography principles. Results: The results show that community supported agriculture is a complex concept based on the active participation of consumers as carers of economic, social, and environmental values. These values are all strongly connected, and together contribute to create an ecosystem where sustainable food practices can be promoted through a “learning by doing” process. Conclusions: This research offers new ways to re-connect and collaborate with consumers in the era of sustainable food consumption.

Keywords: consumer engagement; focused ethnography; alternative food network; new consumption models; community supported agriculture

1. Introduction

The many social, political, and economic challenges that are influencing modern society are also changing the ways that citizens and consumers approach consumption. Economic instability is pushing people to find new strategies to cope with the crisis without losing the need to play a role in their choices [1,2]. Current environmental challenges are encouraging citizens to shift back towards a more natural way to live, in line with the principles of resilience and sustainability [3,4]. Moreover, the social and cultural transitions towards increased social participation have changed the way people re-frame their position in society towards a network of collaborative individuals, rather than a sum of singles [5,6]. In addition, the spread of the Internet has enabled consumers to gain more power to direct their preferences or to create alternative ones [7]. As a consequence, new consumption trajectories are emerging, enhanced by renewed consumer interest in controlling the marketing processes. One area that appears to be of particular relevance is the consumption movements related to the co-creation approach [8–10], including both the co-creation activities conducted by individuals [8,10] and the consumption actions conducted collaboratively [11,12]. In parallel, it is possible to identify other

conflictive forms of consumer participation and co-creation, such as abstention and/or boycotting of a particular product [13], which are types of co-destruction processes [14,15]. Notable recent examples of co-destruction include cases of protesting against palm oil [16] and the movements "against" dairy products [17]. In these cases, a mismatch between consumer values and companies' communication strategies results in protest behaviors.

In this context, the focus tends to be on food consumption. The global food system is nowadays regarded as a major cause of earthly degradation in terms of climate change. The global food system is also considered to be responsible for increasingly challenging land-use conflicts, and rising health and social costs, at both individual and societal levels [18]. Consequently, consumers appear to be mindful about the sustainability of food production and its related consequences, and they prefer to consume food that respects these principles [19,20]. Moreover, as noted above, consumers are now sociologically and psychologically more open to collaboration and participation, as they are aware of the classical power relationships between consumer demand and the products offered by companies that are not suitable for facing the world's current food challenges [21–23]. For these reasons, in the last few decades, research has focused on some of the most relevant food production and consumption models that have been developed in an attempt to resolve those challenges, describing the different movements that have emerged from the encounter (and sometimes conflict) between consumers and producers.

Among the new forms of consumerism [22] enhanced by current social and economic transitions towards more participatory and sustainable processes, the literature has increasingly focused on Alternative Food Networks (AFNs), which include Farmers Markets (FMs), Producer Cooperatives (PCs), Community Gardens (CGs), Solidarity Purchasing Groups (SPGs), particularly relevant in the Italian context, and Community Supported Agriculture's projects (CSAs) [24]. In the literature, different definitions of AFNs have been proposed, but all AFN models share features such as small-scale production [25], local embeddedness [26], ethical frameworks [27], high food quality [28], sustainability of production processes, and respect for nature [29]. Moreover, all the different AFN formats share the concept of being "alternative" because they reflect a different approach to production, one born in opposition to the "conventional" long supply chain model [30]. The idea of being "alternative" is to re-connect food producers and consumers in a close relationship aimed at supporting appropriate and sustainable use of resources. This idea is in opposition to the industrialized system, where the long supply chain has alienated consumers from production processes [31]. Farmers markets and producer cooperatives can be broadly defined as a group of cooperative vendors, with high levels of interdependence among producers, created to generate a competitive advantage [32] that they cannot develop in the conventional market [33]. They represent a form of direct food selling built on mutual trust between farmers and their customers [34] because they embody the ideal values for AFNs, such as a local dimension and high quality food [35,36]. Through these AFN formats, consumers feel more closely connected with the food they buy. FMs and PCs have been discussed in the literature with particular attention on consumers' motivations to buy from them. These can be grouped into tangible reasons, such as product characteristics (quality, healthiness, freshness, and, in some cases, organic processing), [37] or intangible reasons, such as the social impact of this activity in connecting consumers with each other, satisfying their social and emotional needs [38,39], or enhancing the social relationships consumers have with producers by having face-to-face interactions with them, by obtaining information about the products, or by experiencing the satisfaction of supporting local farms [40,41]. In the end, this potentially creates forms of social innovations for the producers [42].

Other forms of AFNs that have been discussed are community gardens and solidarity purchase groups, which can be generally seen as an example of consumers cooperating for food consumption, but including other organizations (i.e., non-governmental organizations, local government agencies, or religious organizations). CGs are created when sections of land are collectively gardened for some specific purposes, such as growing produce for self-consumption, in the form of allotments (common in Europe), school gardens, and teaching/demonstration gardens [43,44]. CGs are often established by volunteers, who want to create an alternative way to produce food, and provide opportunities for

residents on the area. In discussing the CG format, scholars have broadly focused on their role in facilitating access to food resources, strengthening community resilience, particularly in remote or rural areas [45,46], enhancing interpersonal and social relationships and sense of community [47,48] and contributing to people's health and wellbeing [49,50], more strongly than the preservation of natural resources and sustainability [51].

Solidarity purchase groups, born in Italy and particularly common in Europe, provide an alternative form of consumption that is strongly based on a system of social relationship among actors, with aims to use daily food consumption practices to contribute to environmental and social issues [52–54]. SPGs are self-organized groups of citizens who enter into direct contact with producers in order to buy food and other basic goods [55]. In SPGs, the consumers' role is to choose those suppliers that respect ethical and environmental principles, avoiding intermediation [54], and leveraging on social connections in order to support this consumption process. In this particular form of AFN, solidarity is the key feature and, at the same time, the main goal for consumers to undertake this alternative consumption model [55].

Lastly, the community supported agriculture format can be defined as “a form of direct marketing between local farmers and consumers where consumers buy “shares” of the farm before planting begins and receive a portion of whatever is available each week of the growing seasons” [56]. Other definitions of CSA note that it consists of “a variety of partnerships between farmers and consumers, in which consumers buy products directly from the farm, and pay for them in advance and farmers do their best to produce sufficient quantities, quality of food and variety to meet consumers' needs” [57]. In this form, the co-creation processes appear shared between consumers and producers, making this a particularly interesting case to study in order to understand AFNs. The other models described above tend to focus mainly on the consumers' or the producers' perspective, whereas this model is innovative in its focus on the exchange perspective itself. For these reasons, the CSA form provides an interesting case where we can observe and investigate the co-creation framework within the alternative food network.

The Community Supported Agriculture Format

The first CSA projects were initiated in Japan and Chile in the 1970s, and spread in the USA after World War II, inspired by biodynamic farming principles [58]. Biodynamics is a spiritual–ethical–ecological approach to agriculture, food production, and nutrition that utilizes precise observation of natural phenomena to generate as much production as possible from the farm [59]. In other words, the CSA farm is conceived as an attempt to return to a genuine and authentic way to produce food, closely connected with the land and the community around it. The farm is sustained by the active involvement of the key actors, the farmers and the consumers, who are both “shareholders” in the farm's activities. In CSA farms, the consumer pays an amount of money (the subscription fee) at the beginning of the season and receives a box of farm produce every week. The farmer offers different box sizes and members (subscribers) can choose the size that most suits them. Generally, the farmers organize their weekly work into two main processes, the cultivation and harvesting of the produce, and “pick up moments”, when the boxes of produce are delivered to consumers or collected by them from the farm. For the first part of these activities, farmers organize their work independently; at the beginning of the day farmers list all the activities needed to provide the food for the boxes and then start work. Two main principles guide the quantity of the food produced and harvested, the number of members, and the natural condition of the land and the season [60]. One or two days before the “pick up moment”, the farmers concentrate their work around organizing the quantity of food required to fill the boxes. During this time, all farm workers are engaged in selecting and weighing the vegetables that are ripe and ready to be delivered and in allocating the right quantity of food to each box. Then, the farmers decide a range of times when members can come to the farm and pick up their box or have it delivered.

In researching CSA, scholars have studied the CSA format from different points of view. Some have focused on the economic model behind this form of food production, underlining its distinctiveness and innovation as an example of short chain production [61], or as an example of microeconomic models and de-growth. This is understood as “a critique of the dominant macroeconomic model of the endless search for economic growth”, which contrasts with the mainstream microeconomic model based on the concept of *Homo Economicus* (an individual characterized by self-interest and competitive behavior), by adopting the notion of *Homo Psychologicus* (an holistic approach to the consumer) [62,63]. Others researchers have approached the study of CSA in terms of its “transformative power” [64] as a business model embedded in the social setting. Others again have referred to the concept of “moral economy” [65]. Another group of scholars examined CSA through its social aspects, such as an expression of civic engagement [66,67], the role of CSA as involving political and public citizen education [68,69], and the function of CSA in facilitating a sense of community [70]. Other studies have focused on the environmental aspect of CSA, and how it embraces the principles of agro-ecology [71,72], or defines itself as “green business” [73,74], creating a way to pursue sustainable food practices involving both production and consumption. Finally, some research contributions have reported the motivations and psychological outcomes from CSA, such as the perception of healthy diet [75], the leisure dynamics of belonging to a group of people sharing the same values and purposes [76], and satisfaction with the activities involved [77]. This variety of perspectives and disciplines studying CSA has allowed for a multifaceted view of the phenomenon, but it has overlooked the richness of a more integrative and comprehensive look at this consumption model with the aim to consider both consumers’ and producers’ perspectives in parallel. To the best of our knowledge, very few studies have dealt with an analysis of both farmers’ and consumers’ perspectives. We consider that this particular approach, CSA, is able to provide a more detailed picture of alternative consumption experiences as an expression of co-creation practices.

In line with these premises, we propose an exploratory qualitative study to analyze the CSA model through co-creation practices, exploring both consumers’ and producers’ experiences. This research approach offers a new angle of reflection that is broader and includes multiple levels, from the individual, to the social, and the organizational [21]. As this is qualitative exploratory research, using a constructivist epistemology, no preliminary hypotheses are formulated [78], but we present the broad research questions that oriented our work:

- What activities are involved on the farms, from both consumers and producers, and how do these activities involve time, space and objects?
- What are the different values invoked in this CSA format, from both consumers’ and producers’ perspectives?
- What are the meanings attributed to the co-creation processes involved in this CSA format, by both consumers and producers?

To answer these questions, we utilized Focused Ethnography with integrated concepts adapted from symbolic interactionism [79]. We considered this methodology able to capture the direct experiences characterizing this consumption sub-culture, and how practices and values within it are expressed. This methodological approach also allows for a deeper analysis of the role of CSA consumption practices in giving sense to the lived reality of these actors.

Our research examined CSAs in New Zealand, a country that offered an interesting context for a number of reasons. First, this country is both geographically and socially predisposed to sustainable practices. Recognized as a country with a high quality of life [80], and with much of its economy based on agriculture, New Zealand must still cope with several environmental issues [81]. In this context, AFNs are recognized as a possible means to face such challenges and promote more sustainable food practices. In accord to the latest report of the New Zealand Ministry for the Environment and Stats NZ [82], the state of the land in this country is continuing to decline (due to natural and human actions), and this has an impact on both the territory and social life, which are strongly connected in this culture.

Moreover, the natural conformation (and potential for exposure to natural catastrophes) of this land naturally brings people to establish small communities in order to survive. These structural and social elements set the potentiality for the CSA format to develop. However, while other examples of AFNs, such as farmers' markets, are growing in popularity in New Zealand [83], few 'food-box' schemes have begun and the practice of CSA is practically unknown. Hence, the study of this format has potential to find insights that could orient consumers in future alternative food consumption practices. In addition, with the recent economic downturn in this country, wider diffusion of the CSA concept and its principles could lead to beneficial long-term outcomes for social, employment, and sustainability issues, and for an economic renaissance.

In our project, we included the only two farms that were officially recognized as CSA in New Zealand [83] at the time the research was conducted. These farms were both positioned in strategic but isolated areas. Both farms produced organic foods. They were also relatively new (having less than 10 years of activity). Moreover, they were both family businesses, with only a few external and temporary workers involved through the internship programs offered. All marketing activities were managed internally by the family members and presented on the farm websites. Both farms were strongly embedded in their respective local communities, with their own subscribers. While relatively new and unstructured, for these reasons, these two farms provide interesting case studies for gaining insights into their operations.

2. Materials and Methods

We used a qualitative research design to capture both the complexity and the multidimensionality of the phenomena under investigation, and to give voice to the different actors involved in the research. As discussed before, we also adopted a constructionist approach, as we were particularly interested in the ways that people make sense of their life experiences [84,85]. Using a green metaphor to summarize, the qualitative approach is "a garden that has an amorphous and ever changing perimeter" [86] and that malleability allows researchers to fine tune with the phenomenon and catch all its different shades. We opted for a particular form of ethnography, focused ethnography, which aligned with the context and the aims of this research. In general, ethnographic approaches refer to a set of qualitative methods that deal with the study of people's behaviors in a given cultural context [87]. In its traditional form, this methodology generally investigates new or emerging phenomena or cultures [87,88]. Focused Ethnography, in contrast, deals with phenomena occurring within a known culture that contributes to the creation of a sub-culture. For this reason, it is particularly suited to the exploration of fragmented realities like the AFNs [89,90]. As happens in the case of CSA subscribers, participants in focused ethnography create a sub-culture through sharing the same experience, which is the researcher's focus [89]. This focus on the participants' perspectives is an emic, or insider perspective, which allows for understand of the phenomenon [84]. In contrast to traditional ethnography where researchers typically do not enter the field with a formally specified research question, in focused ethnography researchers have a specific goal that can be investigated through short but intensive sessions, accompanied by observations, video or audio-taping, and visual material collection [89].

For this research, the lead researcher (first author) directly visited the farms to gain a situated knowledge and to set this knowledge into the broader socio-economical and cultural background. We also used ethnographic observations and in-depth qualitative interviews, conducted by the lead researcher who was trained in these techniques. The observations were conducted in the two CSA farms identified as case studies, for two weeks on each farm. The observation sessions focused particularly on the gardening practices of food production. Two particular "working moments" were identified as key moments in the farming life; these were the activities related to the cultivation of the land, and the "pick-up moments", when the food was delivered to CSA members. To give structure to the data collected during observation sessions, we prepared an observation grid, structured as follows: field notes (about the farms characteristics, organization, number of people involved, and detailed description of activities); methodological notes (the researcher's on-going reflections on the

research process); some preliminary analysis (the first insights from the field); personal reflections (personal feelings and emotions about the experience of interpreting the data). In addition to these observation sessions, the researcher conducted 20 semi-structured interviews with farmers and community members. To facilitate and elaborate the farmer interviews, we used a visual task [91] to draw a map of the farm. This drawing task allowed the farmers to reflect about the issue being explored by opening up commentary on their interpretations, meanings and the associations of their farming experiences. These interviews were conducted in the farm garden, during work, and lasted around two hours. The interview guide was semi-structured, and was reoriented during the interviews, on the basis of new insights that emerged in the conversation and drawing task; they were fully recorded and transcribed, and then analyzed by the researchers separately, in order to identify principal emerging themes. The farmers were interviewed because of their pivotal role as key informants. Five farmers were interviewed across the two farms. In addition, a purposive sample of 15 consumers was interviewed to collect data about their experiences as a CSA member. This sample was selected in order to gain variety in the factors that are crucial for the experience of being a CSA member (years of membership, type of food box, family composition, socio-economic level). Finally, we merged and integrated the observational field notes with the findings emerged from the interviews into a “thick description” [89,92], which provided a global description of the relevant features characterizing the co-creation of value as identified in this study.

3. Findings

3.1. The CSA Farm from the Inside: The Role of the Garden as a Stage

The drawings realized during the interviews with the farmers allowed the researcher to understand the multifaceted valence of the farm in the co-creation process (Figure 1).

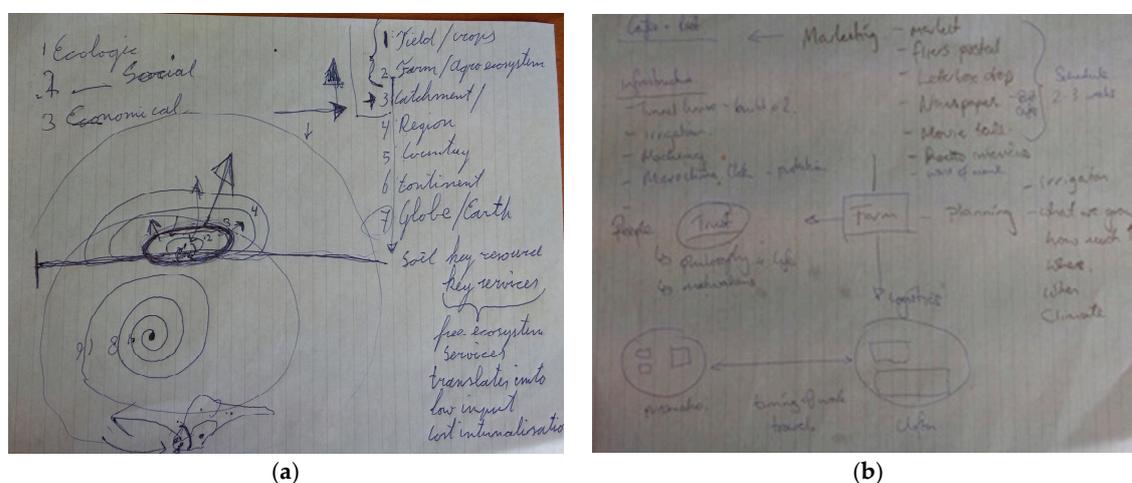


Figure 1. The farmers’ representations of the farm. (a) First farm; (b) second farm.

In particular, it was apparent that the CSA is a combination of different levels, from the social connection, to the economic value, to the environmental preservation, as farmers explained during the interviews:

“It is a combination between the physical elements and other elements, like people and marketing”

(Farmer 1, man)

“We are trying to do something simple, grow food, and provide it to people, but other things happen in the middle and the result is usually positive and the unexpected part from that is interesting”

(Farmer 1, man)

This combination of factors takes place in the garden, which can be considered as the stage for all these processes, and as a physical organizer that facilitates the exchange between the farmers and the members. Importantly, this is accomplished by remaining in connection with the land and the principles of CSA.

“The soil is my key resource, but also it provides the key services to the field or the crop and you can also put the social and the economic level, we work on that . . . ”

(Farmer 2, man)

The garden in fact is the metaphoric representation of the relationship between farmer and members, and it is in the garden that the co-creative of CSA food practices takes place. It is in the garden that the values of the CSA farm are expressed, formed through social, economic and environmental values. In the next sections we report on the expression of these values in turn.

3.2. The Social Value: The Experience to Be Connected through Food

From the social point of view, the garden allows the farmers and members to have a point of meeting and exchange, and this constitutes one of the values sustaining the farm. In particular, the format of the CSA enhances the social connection among all members by creating a network of people sharing the same experience. During the pick-up moments, members become acquainted and share experiences about the farm or about their daily lives. These moments become the occasion to create a vibrant and multifaceted community of people connected by different ideals and philosophies, but all sharing the same experience of sustainable food consumption. Both the farmers and the consumers recognize this value: the farmers in particular describe the social element as:

“An opportunity for people from different philosophies and ideas to interact to each other, so people come to pick up the vegetables and they will probably meet there and start talking about their lives. This social element is an extra intangible element that we can't predict but happens by putting people together”.

(Farmer 1, man)

Moreover, the consumers commented:

“The CSA is something I wanted to be a part of, especially the positive environmental outcomes”

(Consumer 1, woman)

“I joined the farm because there I found a community of similar minded people who can share ideas and experiences”

(Consumer 5, man)

“The CSA is a safe place where people can come together to support each other in the desire to create good food”.

(Consumer 8, woman)

With the purpose of sustaining this network, the farmers also organize special events, such as seasonal dinners or parties, where members are invited to participate with their families. The garden is also the stage for educational events. These disseminate knowledge, through events, conferences and newsletters, and were considered to be the most efficient ways to inform and engage the members in the life of the farms, as the farmers explained:

“The knowledge is a key aspect, how to harvest or cook the vegetables, but also knowledge within the members, so every person has different knowledge so they can share”.

(Farmer 2, man)

Particularly important for the farmers is the support given to the members through recipes, providing information about ways to use and preserve the vegetables. As the farmers report:

“We have a commitment, a sort of mutual arrangement, they are committed to pay and we to supply. But also we need to help them, we give them recipes and we also ask them their preferences, is support rather than “here are your zucchini and deal with them”. Having a relationship with people is providing also some suggestions”.

(Farmer 1, man)

Moreover, the farmers support the member with technical information about the food, the nutrients, peoples’ diets and the seasonality of the food:

“One of the motivation that pushed me to approach to the CSA is to improve my personal knowledge about storing and preparing fresh food. The weekly newsletter has been very helpful and informative. They provide new and exciting things to try and then tell us how to use them. The education point is really important for us”.

(Consumer 8, woman)

The members feel free to hold discussions with the farmers about the vegetables and garden developments, and to share ideas about the management of the weekly vegetable box. Finally, the consumers described the experience of connection with the farmers as a positive aspect of CSA, and as different from classical consumption contexts, such as the supermarket and mass distribution.

“The friendliness and connection we can have with people growing our food is an important aspect. Buying from the supermarket is just not the same! There you are lucky if you know which country the produce comes from, let alone which region or farm. Being a part of the CSA, I have a relationship with the people who are out on the land, planting, tending and harvesting what ends up on our plates. This is so much more direct than the other food buying options”.

(Consumer 2, man)

Another relevant aspect of the social value expressed through the CSA format is related to the sense of community that is developed around it. In particular, the localisation and small scale of CSA allows the consumers to feel a sense of belonging to a community and to where they live. The community becomes the primary, and safe, place to experience this new way to be consumers.

“We originally started with the CSA because we lived in this community but we didn’t know anyone, and we wanted to get in contact with people, to get known by new neighbors and to build a sense of community”.

(Consumer 5, man)

3.3. The Economic Value: To Be a Part of the Exchange

The economic aspects are an important component of CSA. On one hand, the garden provides a direct source of investment and income for the farmers. The soil, if cultivated in the proper way, can sustain the farm in everything it needs to grow enough produce, without resorting to any artificial input. For this reason, the farmers and the members consider the soil as an active element of the relationship:

“The system externalizes the costs because of the diversity required, but this farm aims at internalizing the costs, to have a low input agro-ecological farm, and the farm sustains itself. . . . all the money we spend we spend locally to sustain our economic system”.

(Farmer 2, man)

On the other hand, the economic system that the farmers work towards is the creation of an ecosystem of small farm communities, able to sustain themselves with the help of their consumers. The system can survive by producing what a specific type of soil in a specific area can produce, and by exchanging with others what they can have available in their own areas.

“We are trying to break the chain of the industrialized farming by making a network of local farming communities that are self sustainable”.

(Farmer 2, man)

Another particular economic aspect of CSA is the payment format. For the fee paid, the farmers make a “kind of mutual arrangement, in the philosophy of the CSA” as they aspire to be as inclusive as possible with the needs of all members. This is a specific feature of the CSA format because it allows the partners to remove the physical exchange of food for money and to focus on the experience of being a part of the exchange itself.

“... for me it is important also the fact that they come and pick up, we are not exchanging money, that’s just a kind to give them, it’s really nice, because at the market it’s like “ten dollars”, but I really enjoy this giving to them”.

(Farmer 1, man)

To be a part of the exchange process is a central goal for both farmers and consumers; in pursuing this goal the traditional logics of economic exchange are overturned. Another important insight that emerged from the interviews was that consumers feel like co-owners of the farm itself, through the payment of their fee to support the farm to be able to grow food:

“The consumers feel as though they have a bit of ownership, they come to the farm and they show off “this is the place where my vegetables are grown”, because they are so proud of that, and it is nice, they feel so passionate about the farm.”

(Farmer 1, man)

3.4. The Environmental Value: Resilience to Promote a Better Future

Sustaining the environment is one of the most important goals for CSA farmers and consumers. To support this, from the production side, all farming processes are managed to follow the natural flow of the seasons, and to respect organic and agro-ecologic food production principles. In order to preserve and guarantee the sustainability of the natural resources, the farmers pursue what they call a “give and take logic” with the land. The farmers underlined the necessity of not overusing the land and the soil and not thinking solely about immediate needs, but to consider the soil as a live collaborator in the farming activities. Only by doing so, they held, was it possible to make the CSA concept function as a real long-term investment:

“Being able to be sustainable in what we are growing, local, in a small area, and also to have a system that you are growing each year and you are not depriving it. I guess also resilience is related to the variety of different things we can produce in this way, so if you grow just one kind of thing you don’t probably have the ability to survive ... ”

(Farmer 3, woman)

The choice to pursue environmental preservation was also important to the consumers, and was an important factor in their choice to join the CSA. In the consumer interviews, environmental resilience and preservation was one of the most important values they noted. CSA, in particular, provided a means for consumers to express their power and have an active role in their food production by supporting these principles.

“Lower direct environmental impacts: This is the most important for me. The farm’s approach is much kinder on the immediate environment. Impacts, such as depletion of soil, overuse of water, loss of soil biodiversity, nutrient runoff and pollution, are all lower than for conventional farming. I think these types of effects should be avoided so we can live in a healthier and more bio-diverse country.”

(Consumer 14, woman)

The many challenges facing contemporary society drive consumers to approach new ways to consume, in particular in harmony with natural resources. In CSA, great value is created by approaching food production and consumption through environmentally sustainable principles, a goal that connects both consumers and producers:

“There are a raft of environmentally destructive and unnecessary practices that are embedded in the conventional/factory food production system and I support the CSA as an alternative to that system.”

(Consumer 10, man)

4. Discussion

This research into the CSA format in New Zealand, as a case study, identifies CSA as a complex ecosystem where consumers and producers collaborate together in the definition and expression of different values that are oriented to sustainable food practices. The social, economic and environmental spheres are integrated in different aspects of the life of the farms, but these spheres are all closely connected and interlaced through the adoption of the CSA system and its principles. The findings of this study have their roots in a context characterized by challenges and uncertainty, where the needs of contemporary consumers are complex and multifaceted [21]. The traditional food production system is facing a global environmental and social crisis, and it seems unable to find the right means to connect with consumers, to deeply understand their needs, and to accompany them to change contemporary consumption practices. Consequently, many consumers are now exiting from the traditional paradigm that is unable to satisfy them, and they are creating new, alternative ways to consume and to give sense to their lives. This is often achieved through some new form of co-creation of consumption, which functions as a stage for the experience of new values and principles [22].

The CSA format, as described in the literature, is seen as the expression of the needs of contemporary consumers, born from the global crisis. From the reported experiences of the producers and consumers in our research, it was possible to map the important elements, which characterize CSA in New Zealand. In particular, from the economic point of view, CSA in this research works to support the needs of consumers to be an empowered actor in market exchange, by overturning the classical power logics between the supply and demand of goods or services. The economic power of CSA is largely in the hands of consumers, who contribute at the beginning of the season to the realization of the CSA itself. The farmers rely on the fees of consumers to decide the amount of seasonal production and to organize the management of the farm. Everything in the CSA is made possible by the contribution of consumers. As a consequence, the consumers consider the farm a part of a personal investment and they act accordingly. The consumers feel free to visit the farm and to explore its progress, to contribute to harvesting, and to discuss with the farmer–producer about the future management of CSA, and to participate in its promotion as part of the managerial board. Moreover, farmers are willing to consider the consumers as real investors, by involving them actively, even in the most delicate decisions. Moreover, the absence of a physical money exchange, which characterizes the CSA format, appears to be vital to the idea of a proper co-creation process between them, as they consider themselves to have an equal role in the exchange itself. Research in the field of marketing and social research has documented the shift from the passive consumer to the new identity of the active and empowered consumer [93,94]. This has been recognized as important for food companies that seek to achieve better and more sustainable outcomes.

From the social point of view, the CSA farms here explored give consumers a place to express their needs for connection and sharing, albeit in territories characterized by a sense of dispersion and

isolation due to the geographical location. Contemporary consumers are often characterized by their need to be always connected with their networks through the use of social media [95]. Our research in these two CSA farms underlines how consumers, when located in relatively isolated social conditions, prefer to act through their real communities and networks, creating what has been described as “linking value”, the value of a post-modern society [96]. Moreover, food consumption practices have always been recognized as a way to strengthen social dimensions. In this respect, CSAs offer a real place to re-create social networks for people, where they can discuss and share their experiences, to make sense of them through food consumption [97]. The CSA in particular becomes a vibrant community where consumers feel a sense of belonging, and by strengthening this sense they feel more connected and keen to contribute to the co-creation process.

Finally, the environmental values of CSAs underline their efforts to adapt to the adverse conditions and geographical challenges they have to face as a country, by connecting the past and the future. Nowadays, consumers express their need to have a role in the preservation of the future, and for most, a change in food practices is the first step. It is clear that consumers nowadays are driven not only by individualized values (such as personal tastes, individual health, price convenience), but also by public values (such as longer-terms environmental sustainability and social resilience). Consumers are ready to change their personal interests and orientations to support the “common good” [98], such as the survival of the community to which they belong [99]. The CSAs, for the people we interviewed, represent a particularly suitable place to pursue their individual objectives, while not forgetting the importance of long-term sustainability of the rest of the community. To summarize, in the case of the CSAs studied here, the values that consumers and producers report in regard to the CSA activities and features reside in a multi-layered ecosystem, composed by different dimensions and spheres of their consumption experiences.

A final point concerns the application of the framework of co-creation in CSA consumption patterns, which is innovative in comparison to traditional food industry practices [100,101], with their top-down perspective of the company to the consumers. In sharp contrast, the strength of the CSA format, as reported by consumers and producers in the present research, lies in the way that co-creation is expressed—as a full engagement of the actors in all the activities, so that the consumer can really understand what happens when choosing this food model and can feel deeply attached to it, investing a part of their identity as consumers. They are considered and involved in the farm’s business plans, investments and organization, in the management and harvesting of produce, and are fully aware of the potentials risks related to this farming activity. This deep involvement allows consumers to become ambassadors for processes of change in the regions where they live, and to share their experiences in a continuous “learning by doing” process. In this regard, a longer-term change towards more aware and sustainable consumer practices, invested changes of identity and lifestyle can be implemented, especially when framed within a broader project moving “from a micro-level to a macro-level in the relationship between people and their world” [102,103]. We have seen many cases of boycotts of food marketing by consumers in situations where companies do not meet their needs [94]. Alternative food networks, and in particular the CSA format considered here, may be a potential site for unsatisfied consumers who find within it a means to offer their power and knowledge, and to be recognized in this new role. Alternatively, this approach to co-creation could become an alternative for food companies and networks that could adopt this as a means to collaborate with and involve consumers.

5. Conclusions

In this study, we applied a co-creation framework to the study of alternative food networks in New Zealand as they appear, for geographical and social features, particularly in need—and promising—for the development of more sustainable food consumption practices, to provide an example. Through the interviews with consumers and producers it was possible to explore how their co-creation practices are implemented and managed, highlighting a complex ecosystem of actions based on three main value spheres (economical, social and environmental), which they draw on to approach everyday

activities in these farms. We finally collected some suggestions for these CSAs, which may be of relevance also for others farmers in New Zealand who want to approach this activity, or in other Countries. The first one could be described in the sense of the consumer–farmer relationship, which appears to be the core element through which to pursue a course of mutually enriching change aimed at potentially built a sustainable future. The possibility to have a strong and direct relation with the farmers, from the sharing of the fees, to the educational activities, allows consumers to feel really engaged in the activities, and so to give sense to their consumption experience and to be keener to change them into more sustainable practices. Moreover, we underline the perceived importance for consumers and producers to consider the CSAs as real and proper self-sustained systems that can collaborate with other similar cases in order to create a network of sustainable and socially relevant practices, adapted for their context. This appears particularly evident from their interviews, as they report the different levels of values previously described (social, economical and environmental) need to be considered in one multi-componential system. If farmers recognize the importance of leveraging on different aspects in proposing this activity, it could be a promising area of social, economical and environmental investment.

The study of CSAs in New Zealand has brought to light the multidimensionality of this phenomenon and the role of people's engagement in it as a key element for the creation of an environment for consumer education and behavioral change. In proposing these results, we would highlight the innovative nature of this research in examining the co-creation perspective applied to the CSA format in the New Zealand context, where a change in consumer practices is regarded as particularly urgent to respond to environmental and societal challenges. Moreover, the application of this framework to AFNs is lacking in current research, and through this research, we sought to open up the study of this phenomenon. However, we would also highlight some potential limitations of our research. The two CSA farm sites that were analyzed are prototypical in terms of the phenomenon studied, and they offer an interesting case study of CSA in operation. Research involving other farms in other contexts is needed to provide support for our findings. The epistemological underpinnings of this research do not provide for generalization of the results, but the research does provide an in-depth look at, and insights into, the processes involved in the co-creation of value in the CSA format. We look forward to future research to extend and qualify these insights through cross-case and cross-cultural studies.

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