



Unveiling the Experiential Dimensions Driving Local Producers, and the Potential Ways of Transmitting the Experience to Consumers

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Abstract: *Most studies related to sustainable small-scale local producer lifestyles focus on producing healthy foods. Research that integrates other aspects of mental and spiritual well-being into the holistic concept of a healthy lifestyle is mostly missing. The study examines the motives behind the lifestyle choices of farmers engaged in sustainable production in Western Hungary and draws attention to aspects that are beyond the preference for environmentally conscious (sustainable) production of foods. The authors are looking for an answer to what motivates local producers to carry out their activities and what relatable elements of experience can be identified.*

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent times, the field of sustainable consumer trends has garnered substantial interest, centered on the capacity and potential for altering food consumption patterns. Scientific literature about health-conscious consumers primarily emphasizes physical health as a crucial component of overall well-being. Researchers examining the motivations of eco-friendly food consumers also highlight aspects such as trust, way of life, and self-actualization.

In this study, the authors shift their focus to the motivations of sustainable production among producers, with the goal of demonstrating that the attributes of sustainable production are not limited to environmental sustainability and healthy lifestyles but can also be interpreted in a social context.

The authors begin with the premise that responsible production involves considering social, environmental, and ethical factors in both the short and long term. This underscores the importance of holistic research and supports the argument that the concept of sustainable production cannot be reduced to health consciousness alone. Therefore, sustainability research should explore the dimensions of the inner experience of the production.

The study examines the intrinsic motives behind and the lifestyle choices of local producers engaged in sustainable production in Western Hungary, drawing attention to aspects and components

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of this choice that go beyond the preference for environmentally conscious (sustainable) production of healthy food, naturally taking into account the effects of recent market and technological changes which influence the evolution of producers' beliefs, perceptions and habits.

According to the authors, responsible production cannot be solely determined by goal-oriented and profit-oriented motives. Instead, it may also be influenced by components such as absorption, environmental connection, and social stimulation. The authors aim to examine how the 'choice of path' (i.e., the production processes) and the 'goals to be achieved' relate to each other from the producer's perspective.

2. METHODS

Prior to delving into the subject matter, the authors found it essential to clarify the concepts of local production and local products, along with their unique attributes.

Table 1. The unique attributes of local production and local products

Attributes	Sources of information
Geographical proximity (production, processing, distribution, and consumption occur geographically close to each other or within the same region within a 20 to 100 km radius)	(Beke, 2021; Cvijanović et al., 2020, Kneafsey et al., 2013; Lang et al., 2014; Mesić et al., 2021; G. Fekete, 2009; Szomi, 2022; Nemes et al., 2019)
Subjective (depends on factors such as the size of the population and whether the settlement is rural or urban in nature or the closeness of cities)	(European Commission, 2013)
Social proximity (closeness of the relationship between and the familiarity with the producers, trust, transparency, information sharing)	(G. Fekete, 2009; Kiss et al., 2020; Kovács et al., 2022; Schlett, 2021)
Perceived traits (authenticity, freshness, better quality and taste, uniqueness, cultural heritage preservation)	(Sántosi & Böröndi-Fülöp, 2014; Szente et al., 2014, Nagy, 2018; Szegedyné Fricz et al., 2020; Kovács et al., 2022; Lisányi et al., 2022)
Positive social impacts (health consciousness, environmental considerations, uniqueness, and a desire to support local economies)	(G. Fekete 2009; Skallerud & Wien, 2019; Cvijanović et al., 2020; Kiss et al., 2020; Koncz et al., 2021; Mesić et al., 2021)

Source: Own research

It is important to note that local production operates on different principles than other sectors producing for the global market. As human labour inputs or other costs may be higher, it is necessary to identify the characteristics that may result in a positive shift for small-scale farmers to then examine their role in sustainable production attitudes and farming strategy choices.

The smallholder lifestyle and life management practices have their specific character traits. In contrast to large-scale production, the producer is connected to the product. They do not merely specialize in a single operation but oversee the whole production process. The position of the owner is, therefore, active. The owner is present, exercising actual control over the enterprise and its physical assets. In addition to these, intellectual values may also be attached to ownership. Ownership is a direct source of pleasure in addition to the income. The enterprise thus contributes to fulfilling the small producer's personality. It thus represents a subjective value for the business owner, regardless of its market value.

Profitability is a measure of the effectiveness and efficiency of work. In modern culture, individuality and privacy are highly valued, and people value themselves according to what they have achieved in life as individuals (Scitovsky, 1990).

There is a wealth of psychological research that shows that the most important source of human experience is social stimulation. However, a common effect of a rational, utilitarian, work-centred attitude to life is that it leads to having less time and attention to others. Although the quality and richness of interpersonal relationships increase the sense of happiness to a much greater extent than increasing income or consumption (Hellmich, 2020; Schlett, 2021; Wärneryd, 1988).

Therefore, in our research, we attached great importance to examining the relationship between the importance and depth of profitability decisions as well as interpersonal relationships. We aim to understand how local agro-entrepreneurs in a sub-region that still retains traditional characteristics view interpersonal relationships and social embeddedness. The other focus of our research was the inner experience of the activity. Psychological studies in the realm of work have primarily concentrated on enhancing individual productivity and reducing friction.

However, work is often characterized by a sense of alienation. Many work-related challenges can be traced back to this sense of alienation, which arises from extreme specialization. Classical and neoclassical economics assumed that people's decisions were solely influenced by rational expectations. However, the rise of behavioral economics was prompted by the need to analyze the distortions caused by rational expectations, using psychological and other social science disciplines (Thaler, 2016). Our paper, however, does not focus on human biases in 'rational choice', but instead asks how the intrinsic nature of local producers' activities contributes to their behavioral attitudes.

Focusing solely on the objective of an activity may diminish the very essence of participation and involvement. A range of human activities, including sports, play, and the fine arts, serve to enrich our lives with pleasure and provide joyful experiences. In these autotelic activities, satisfaction is derived from the activity itself, without the need for external rewards or motivations (Csikszentmihályi, 2014a, 2014b, 2014c; Pugno, 2014; Scitovsky, 1990).

Building on the theoretical foundations, the authors opted for using the in-depth interview technique in the first phase of the research project, as these interviews provided them with more in-depth knowledge to explore:

- the main motivations for local producers to carry out their activities;
- the level of autotelic factors; and
- the role of the autotelic factors as driving forces.

The target area of the study was the West-Transdanubia. It is one of the NUTS-2 statistical regions of Hungary, surrounded by the Slovenian, Austrian and Slovakian borders. The region is relatively fragmented due to its topography, which gives the region its unique appearance. This geographical feature has influenced the local communities and their way of life. The fragmentation of the landscape has provided an ideal environment for small-scale production. Ten local producers (cheese makers, wine producers, horticulturists, meat processors, jam and syrup producers, fruit producers, beekeepers, pasta makers, and essential oil producers) were interviewed. Data collection took place between September 20, 2023, and November 15, 2023.

3. RESULTS – THE PREFERENCES OF LOCAL PRODUCERS

In our in-depth interviews, we set out to uncover the key attitudes defining sustainable small-scale producers, looking beyond the obvious profit motive. The psychological needs arising

from the conditions of human existence go beyond material considerations. We looked beyond the satisfaction of these needs to identify the determinants of psychological and mental health. Our goal was to understand not only which attitudes are most significant but also how they interconnect and influence one another.

From our review of the psychological tableau of well-being during the in-depth interviews, it quickly became apparent that economic activity, or economic success in the narrow sense, is only one source of well-being. In our research, we explored the aspects of small producers' attitudes that they perceive as determinants.

In our research, we identified two main groups of attitudes:

Social - cultural attachments:

- importance of **human-social ties**,
- the importance of **local community ties**,
- organic **landscape-people relationship**,
- attachment to a distinctive **local product** (local exotic) or local production processes,
- the importance of local **cultural tradition**.

Autotelic attitude:

- need to be **involved**.
- within the group, an **escapist** orientation has become clearly distinguishable, where the escape from a modern, mechanized, and crowded world, the immersion in an activity, is the dominant experience.

Of course, while considerable overlaps exist, their dominance may vary widely (Rützler, 2021). Nonetheless, it's crucial to pinpoint that the most stimulating phenomena are fundamentally rooted in human action, imagination, and local culture.

3.1. Social Embeddedness

While mutual stimulation is generally not framed as an economic phenomenon, the 'background experience' associated with economic activity and resources is highly valued among the benefits generated. Most of the stimulating effects were observed within human connections and their reciprocity. Our research shows that the stimulus was provided to producers by the infinite variety and unpredictability of human interactions and the myriad challenges they posed.

The research has revealed that one of the main sources of satisfaction for local producers is social stimulation, much of which is mutual stimulation.

3.2. Autotelic Attitude

Based on Csíkszentmihályi's flow theory (Csíkszentmihályi, 2014a, 2014b, 2014c) and the works of Csíkszentmihályi and Nakamura (2014) and Csíkszentmihályi et al. (2014), the authors identified several components of autotelic attitude. It is important to emphasize that we can speak of autotelic activity when we do something not for further gain, but simply because we like doing it. If a given activity is autotelic in nature, then the health benefits associated with that activity, or even the benefits of being free from stress, are irrelevant (Schlett, 2021).

The authors of this paper identified the following autotelic characteristics:

- **Hobby:** work as a hobby;
- **Talent** in the field, but at least a balance between the individual's abilities and the difficulty of the task;
- **Present-oriented:** focus on the present rather than the unpredictable future;
- **Self-serving/Intrinsic:** the activity should be intrinsically rewarding;
- **Absorption:** to be completely immersed in what someone is doing, to identify with it.

3.3. Experience Motives Based on the Results of the In-depth Interview Surveys

The responses from the in-depth interviews helped to identify the main local producer motivations, and these can be put in parallel with the two key dimensions identified in the literature. Figure 1. shows the main mentions and reflections of local producers in relation to the socio-occupational and autotelic motives.

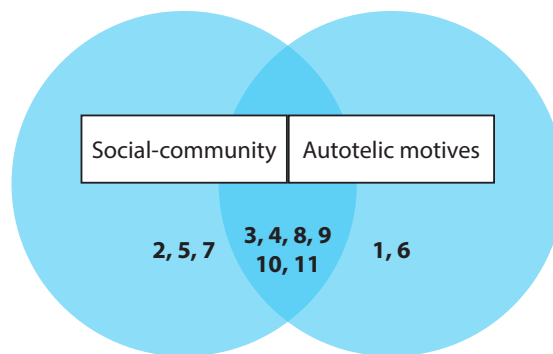


Figure 1. Social Embeddedness and Autotelic Attitudes - the main mentions and reflections of local producers in relation to the socio-occupational and autotelic motives

Source: Own research

The following main responses were given by the local producers interviewed:

1. “The product and the activity that I do is me.”
2. “To do something I believe in, something that is good and works, because years of experience and tradition give it strength.”
3. “I get pleasure from the activity I do, and I give pleasure to others.”
4. “It is a good feeling to teach others something, and it’s nice to see that they are happy to take the created product away.”
5. “The strength and cooperation of the local community is a huge motivation.” (see for example Zala Völgyi Nyitott Porták).
6. “My hobby gave me the idea, and this is where I can really feel complete.”
7. “It’s important for me to be natural and to incorporate that into the products.”
8. “It is a good feeling when I come up with something new and it pleases my customers.”
9. “The smile and feedback of a returning customer is what gives me the real experience.”
10. “There’s nothing like the experience and atmosphere of a local fair.”
11. “For me, it’s the community programmes that give the real experience.”

(**Source:** own research, 2023).

Both the social and community and the autotelic factors can be delineated from the responses. However, as shown in Figure 1., the responses classified in the intersection of the two circles deserve special attention, as they combine the power of both dimensions to create a more profound

emotional imprint. The landscape-people relationship, local community cooperation and consumer involvement play a key role in this system. It is no coincidence that producers are becoming increasingly active in organising experiential programmes, such as tastings, wine tours, excursions, educational presentations, and product demonstrations. The experience is perceived by both producers and consumers, and the entertainment environment creates a good atmosphere. At the same time, tastings, fairs, and demonstrations enable information to be obtained directly from producers, thus creating a more personal relationship between producers and consumers, deepening trust and bonds, and developing consumer awareness.

Other benefits include the marketing value for local producers to showcase their products, promoting local products and strengthening the local brand. The programmes revitalize local traditions and can positively impact community building, local cohesion, knowledge sharing and the attractiveness of local tourism. All this is extremely important, as it is an increasingly evident challenge and opportunity for local producers to provide consumers with something extra that they will experience and then tell their friends and acquaintances about, remember positively, and even cherish in their memories.

4. FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

The findings of this study open further research opportunities that may contribute to a more complete exploration of the underlying determinants of producers' flow experience. The results provide a sound basis and pave the way for examining the extent to which authentic producer experiences can be transferred, transformed, and communicated to consumers.

Based on the results of the in-depth interviews, the authors plan to deepen the analysis of producer attitudes in the Zala Valley and other regions using quantitative methods. The study may also provide an opportunity for comparative studies, exploring consumer perceptions, and identifying producer-consumer linkages.

6. CONCLUSION

The research has shown that the small entrepreneurial mindset is rooted in needs beyond the physical, such as involvement, the socio-cultural attachment to the past, tradition, nature, place, local culture, and transcendence. In terms of self-acquisition, self-perception and the building blocks of experiencing, for local producers, the close connection with their products and their markets, their environment and local traditions has great potential.

The results of the in-depth interviews showed that both social and autotelic factors are present in the motivations for production. However, at the intersection of the two circles in Figure 1., a new dimension is clearly visible, which can lead to an even higher level of producer experience. In this, collaboration, human involvement, interaction, co-creation, and knowledge transfer play a vital role. And these factors can lead us towards an even richer producer experience that is "entertaining, enriching, aesthetically pleasing and totally immersive" (Pavluska, 2014, p. 384).

Our research also shows that:

- "If we can find ourselves, anything can create a flow, we can enjoy the energy flowing through us almost continuously, without having to waste our energy on side trips." (Csíkszentmihályi, 1997).

- “We are looking for meaning in our lives, something we believe in, something that goes beyond us.” (Horváth, 2020).
- When an experience is shared with others, it becomes sustainable and becomes a shared memory. Shared memories have a longer lifespan than individual memories (Ásványi, 2022). This increases trust and attachment, which links the experiential dimensions studied in this article even more intensively.

It can be concluded that the most intense experiential driving force is the combination of the social and community and the autotelic factors and their intersection point, which can create a deeper emotional imprint.

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