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Scholarship on alternative food networks: from mid-life crisis to life begins at 40?

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ABSTRACT

This paper critically assesses the literature on Alternative Food Networks (AFNs), based on a systematic literature review, encompassing work from both the rural studies and marketing disciplines. It reflects on the gaps between the contributions from both disciplines, and how they could be addressed in future research. A typology of AFNs helps understand the varied challenges faced. Too many AFN studies depend solely on producer and loyal customer perspectives, leading to overly optimistic assessments of their consumer appeal. Moreover, a tendency to downplay or overlook marketing management considerations, reduces the literature's relevance for practitioners. Addressing the latter, and more critical assessments of how different types of AFNs can address social and planetary imperatives, are vital for reinventing the AFN literature to overcome its mid-life crisis.

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Introduction

Alternative Food Networks (AFNs) involve alliances that *develop novel practices of food provision that are more in tune with . . . values, norms, needs, and desires, that build on the reproduction and revaluation of local sources, and that result in food of distinct and better appreciated qualities* (Roep & Wiskerke, 2012, p. 206). AFNs can take many forms and models (Cicatiello, 2020), including Community Supported Agriculture (CSA), solidarity purchasing groups, community gardens and allotments, consumer food co-operatives, civic food movements and charters, as well as farmers' markets (Misleh, 2022).

The nature of participant relationships varies across these different types of AFN. For instance, conventional buyer-seller, transactional relationships largely characterise farmers' markets (Pilař et al., 2019). In contrast, CSA involves far higher levels of commitment from consumers, who pay an upfront, fixed sum (often referred to as a membership fee) to

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receive a proportional harvest share, typically on a weekly basis (Birtalan et al., 2020; Opitz et al., 2019). Given the diversity of producer-consumer relationships, some question the utility of the AFN concept – pointing to the limitations of grouping together initiatives defined more by their difference from conventional, multiple retailer-led food supply chains, than commonalities (Tregear, 2011). However, for others, the ‘*term alternative holds analytical value as it grasps the relationality between the process of building alternatives and the maintenance of the hegemonic neoliberal food system. [It] . . . highlights the power dimension better than other terms such as diversity or sustainability, as its opposition denotes an ongoing struggle with an ‘other’*’ (Misleh, 2022, pp. 1028–9).

As forms of social and economic activity, AFNs can be readily interrogated and theorised using concepts familiar to marketing scholars, such as market structures and dynamics, customer loyalty, trust, communications, and processes of value creation. However, the literature on AFNs to date has been dominated by studies from the disciplines of rural sociology and geography, with very little engagement with marketing scholarship. This reflects a general lack of crossover and unfamiliarity between these two domains, which resulted in the early AFN literature largely focusing on producer perspectives and an acknowledgement that ‘future research must pay closer attention to the role consumers play in creating and maintaining innovative producer – consumer relationships’ (Venn et al., 2006, p. 257).

Generally, the AFN literature, published in rural studies’ journals, acknowledges the value of marketing perspectives, particularly in helping practitioners build brand communities (Giordano et al., 2018) and customer loyalty (Hashem et al., 2018). However, not all scholars addressing AFNs are so welcoming. Some are hostile to marketing, arguing that it devolves responsibilities for changing food systems to motivated citizens and consumers, which cannot be fulfilled (Goodman et al., 2012). Furthermore, marketing masks the harms of capitalism, fetishising products as having inherent properties independent of the social labour that creates them (Gunderson, 2014). The latter point is consistent with Marxist critiques; that marketing promulgates false consciousness (Berger, 2016), obscuring the inability of AFNs to ‘wrest control from corporate agribusiness and create a domestic, sustainable, and egalitarian food system’ (Goodman, 2003, p. 2).

Meanwhile, in the marketing literature, AFNs generally lack visibility, despite marketing scholars’ growing interest in novel business models that generate prosocial benefits for consumers (Atanasova et al., 2025) and the environment (Bocken et al., 2025). We argue that this lack of visibility is to the detriment of both fields of scholarship, and this is an opportune time for mutual engagement. Particularly, given the urgency and importance of broader concerns over food insecurity, sustainability, and climate change, the need to experiment with and implement alternative models and initiatives of food provisioning becomes ever more pressing. Addressing wider social and environmental challenges is fundamental for the legitimacy and reinvigoration of AFN inquiry across the breadth of disciplines engaging with it.

The objectives of the paper are thus threefold. First, we seek to *critically review the contemporary literature on AFNs (years 2010–2024), considering work from both the rural studies and marketing disciplines*. By deliberately setting out to review work from both fields, we capture a broader perspective of the knowledge base on AFNs, beyond what has been achieved by existing reviews. *Second, we seek to reflect on the gaps within and between the contributions of scholarship in both disciplines*. *Third, we assess how these gaps could be*

addressed, to further the research agenda on AFNs. The findings draw on a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) of scholarship in both the rural studies and marketing disciplines.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. First, we conceptualise AFNs, supported by a framework of AFN types. A short overview of the evolution of the literature on AFNs follows, to set the context. The methods employed for the SLR are then described, before presentation of the main findings, which organises the literature into four themes. The paper concludes with an identification of gaps and discussion of implications for the AFN research agenda.

What are AFNs?

Studies of AFNs often define the concept vaguely, before proceeding to investigate one specific type. However, as types differ substantially, this risks confusing and overgeneralising results. Figure 1 presents a classification of types of AFN, according to two dimensions which are often referred to in conceptualisations of what makes any food network or system ‘alternative’. We present this to clarify, at the outset, the heterogeneity of types of AFN, and the extent to which certain types, in principle, may be expected to foster socio-economic change and beneficial outcomes in the food system.¹ The first dimension is the extent to which the market, or web of participant relationships in which the AFN is embedded, exhibits *structural features which are novel or radical compared to conventional or mainstream market structures/actor relationships*. For example, forms of direct selling and food purchasing venue (e.g. farmers’ markets, co-operatives, consumer buying groups) embody through their alternative market structures and conventions (Chiffolleau & Dourian, 2020; Kirwan, 2006) forms of resistance to industrial food systems, albeit operating in practice as spaces *within* rather than independent of conventional systems (Ilbery & Maye, 2005). Second, is the extent to which the AFN gives scope to *involve, empower and reward participants from social groups that are often excluded or marginalised from mainstream food systems*. For example, ‘civic food networks’ (Renting et

		Potential to capture novel market structures/relationships	
		Lower	Higher
Potential to include marginalized or under-represented social groups	Lower	Farm shops Farmers’ markets	Veg box schemes
	Higher	Food surplus distribution schemes Food banks	Community supported agriculture Community gardens Community food share

Figure 1. Classification of types of afn, according to two dimensions.

al., 2012) promote democracy, sovereignty, and citizenship as essential attributes of AFNs, with some AFN models such as CSA (Bonfert, 2022) being more successful than others (see Slocum, 2007) at inclusive community participation. Both these dimensions are familiar to marketing scholarship. The nature and forms of market structures and related practices are at the core of theorisation in the marketing discipline (e.g. Vorhies & Morgan, 2003), while issues of access to and empowerment within markets has long been the subject of study within critical marketing studies (Tadajewski, 2010).

Figure 1 indicates the extent to which radical market relations and/or empowerment potential may be realised by different types of AFN, in principle. In quadrant 1, are AFNs with limited potential for both. For example, farm shops and farmers' markets may rely on producer-consumer transactional relationships in shorter chain form and are socially embedded, but they are not oriented, *in principle*, to attracting participants from excluded groups. Rather, quadrant 1 AFNs resemble essentially niche markets. In quadrant 2 are AFNs with more alternative structures underpinning participant-consumer relations (such as subscription-based food boxes), but which are not oriented towards marginalised groups, *per se*. Quadrants 3 and 4 capture AFNs which have higher potential, in principle, to reach marginalised groups. Q3 captures those which do so via fairly conventional market mechanisms (charity stores that sell discounted surplus food and food surplus schemes involving multiple retail chains), while Q4 captures those that exhibit more novel or radical structures for participant relations (community gardens, food share and CSA).

We do not include generic terms such as 'organic food', 'ethical consumption' or 'sustainable food' in the classification. This is because these descriptors are too broad to be meaningful to classify as types of AFN. We also do not include foraging or prosumption *per se*, because if undertaken as individualised activity, they do not involve either engagement with a network nor exchange relationships. Informal food sharing, bartering and community solidarity initiatives can be considered examples of prosumption that are engaged with networks and involve exchanges (Veen et al., 2021). In that case, they are examples of AFNs in Q4.

The classification, as well as reminding us of the heterogeneity of AFNs, also points to how theories and prescriptions for the success of AFNs depends on the position of the type on the two dimensions. For example, for AFNs in Qs 1 and 3, which depend on retail, market structures and mechanisms, economic performance metrics would be applicable (e.g. sales in a farm shop, footfall at a charity store, tonnes of food not sent to landfill). However, for AFNs in Qs 2 and 4, qualitative measures may be more salient (e.g. feelings of community connection/belonging, sense of wellbeing from volunteering time/effort). These distinctions will be referred to in subsequent sections.

Evolution of AFN scholarship

This section provides a brief overview of the literature on AFNs, starting with the main phases of research, largely undertaken in the rural studies field, before the SLR, which considers in greater detail marketing and consumer aspects.

Misleh (2022) identifies three waves of research on AFNs. The first wave, emerged out of a 1980s literature on the 'crisis of agriculture' (Whatmore, 1991), which perceived a dominant food regime that trapped farmers in an ever-tighter cost price squeeze, with industrialised food practices generating extensive negative social and environmental

externalities and offering consumers standardised foods of poor nutritional quality (Krzywoszynska, 2015; Marsden et al., 1993; Murdoch & Miele, 1999; Murdoch et al., 2000). Early writings on AFNs, by scholars in rural studies, regarded them as a solution to the crisis, which could redistribute value to primary producers as part of a 'quality turn' in agri-food production, avoiding the pitfalls of 'race to the bottom' commodity production (Marsden & Franklin, 2013; Misleh, 2022; Murdoch et al., 2000). Proponents argued that such a quality turn reconnects producers and consumers (Cicatiello, 2020), so that AFNs were at the vanguard of transition to a fairer, more sustainable, and quality-oriented food system (Fourat et al., 2020). Nonetheless, this early research tended to view AFNs through a producer-oriented lens, with little critical reflection on how AFNs may or may not offer solutions to consumers' problems. This lack of consumer perspectives was an important oversight, leading to an incomplete theorisation of how AFNs can function effectively as forms of economic activity (Carzedda et al., 2018).

A second wave of research, characterised by Misleh (2022) as occurring between 2005–2010, problematised AFNs, reacting against perceived over romanticised assessments, which ignored problematic aspects and the trade-offs often inherent in achieving AFNs' economic, social and environmental objectives (Goodman, 2004; Guthman, 2002, 2008). Much of this second wave of AFN research drew on political economy critiques of neoliberalism (Jamie Peck & Tickell, 2002). Far from being alternative to market mechanisms, it regarded AFNs as dependent on it (Guthman, 2002, 2008). Specifically, from this perspective, the private sector converts ethical and social concerns into a business opportunity (Watts et al., 2018), with AFNs simply expressions of niche market-focused, rent-extraction strategies (Guthman, 2008), that appeal to a middle class yearning for distinction and a veneer of refinement (Huddart Kennedy et al., 2018). This work offers generally a singular, often negative assessment of these arrangements, regarding relations involving markets and businesses as antithetical to AFNs. Some commentators, however, reject this dualistic characterisation (e.g. Sonnino & Marsden, 2006), positioning AFN market economy relations as more symbiotic, and seeking to avoid a crude AFN and mainstream market bifurcation.

The third era of AFN research, dated by Misleh (2022) as from 2010 onwards, reacted against the previous wave's downplaying of the socio-cultural dimensions of AFNs, embracing post-structuralist perspectives on diverse economies (Gibson-Graham, 2008). Applications of the latter drew attention to the array of relationships, rationales, and social values underpinning AFNs (Little et al., 2010; Misleh, 2022), and the possibilities of food movements to contribute to civic and environmental objectives (Schulz & Krueger, 2018). AFN types identified in this wave include, for example, buying groups, consumer clubs, co-operatives, food share and local and community action initiatives, some with well-established cultural economic histories in mainstream food markets. Accordingly, this stream views AFNs as part of an alternative economy, and while not ignoring challenges, is nonetheless optimistic about the possibilities for engaging 'in new or re-vitalized forms of socio-economic practice' that do not harm society or nature (Haase et al., 2018, p. 57). The primary focus of this literature concerns 'how particular structures and political conjunctures can influence the scope and content of AFNs while also investigating the possibilities of these initiatives for articulating social change' (Misleh, 2022, p. 1034). Here we observe, then, less a critique of relations associated with markets and business, but rather a recognition of alternative initiatives as equally embedded in market systems,

value creation, relationship building and exchange. However, marketers remain largely absent from these debates, and questions remain as to how well this literature adequately addresses the creation, communication, and exchange of value in AFNs.

In the meantime, marketing scholarship on AFNs has been much scanted. Although decades of work consider phenomena such as ethical and sustainable consumption, much less has been conducted on the specific AFN types that are referred to in [Figure 1](#). Notable contributions have come from papers in the *Journal of Marketing Management*, including a 2017 special issue on ‘alternatives’ within food and drink markets and marketing (Smith Maguire et al., 2017), as well as contributions in the *International Journal of Consumer Studies* and the *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*. In the next section, the paper introduces the SLR which concentrates on what has happened since the start of the third and most recent wave of AFN research, i.e. 2010 onwards according to the framework of Misleh (2022).

Methodology for the systematic literature review (SLR)

To undertake the SLR, we followed the Scientific Procedures and Rationales for Systematic Literature Reviews (SPAR-4-SLR) protocol of Paul et al. (2021). Through three stages known as assembling, arranging and assessing, this seeks to produce a comprehensive mapping of the state of the art and stimulate an agenda for future research. [Figure 2](#) summarises the process.

In the *assembling* stage, the database(s) to search and search strings were identified. We selected two databases, namely Scopus and Web of Science, due to their comprehensive coverage of peer-reviewed journals. The key term used for searching titles, keywords and abstracts was *alternative food**, which reflected that although AFN is the most common conceptualisation, some authors refer to alternative food movements, systems or initiatives (e.g. de Hoop & Jehlička, 2017). The search was limited to papers published in English, in the years 2010–2024, in keeping with the timeline of the most recent wave of AFN research (Misleh, 2022). This timeframe helped structure the review on how the AFN literature responded to initial criticisms. Geographically, we limited the search to Europe, as the primary focus of the AFN literature and to recognise that the review does not address food systems in developing countries. While making for a more cohesive review of the literature, we note the limitations of the focus on Europe and the inclusion of only publications written in English within the SLR. Only journal articles in the broad domain of social sciences (which incorporates rural studies, geography, sociology, marketing, business and economics) were included. The final searches occurred on the 8 May 2024.

In the *arranging* phase, search results were organised and then purified. Specifically, they were downloaded into Endnote and coded by author, journal title, article type (conceptual/empirical/review/other), year, keywords, country, and abstract. Purification then occurred with abstracts inspected, leading to the removal of duplicates identified in both databases, as well as editorials, and papers without consideration of AFNs and marketing aspects. After the initial scrutiny of abstracts, the remaining papers were read in full. This led to a small number of additional exclusions ($n=5$), due to a lack of relevance. At the completion of the arranging phase, 77 papers remained (see [Appendix 1](#)).



Figure 2. Systematic literature review conducted according to SPAR-4-SLR procedures.

In the assessing phase, scrutiny of each paper occurred in terms of the type of AFN investigated, the objective(s) of the study, methodology employed, the country/countries in which any empirical work occurred, the theories utilised, main findings and identified limitations which can inform future research (documented in [Appendix 1](#)). The latter helped define research gaps and construct the agenda for future research. Thematic analysis, following the procedures of Braun and Clarke (2006), sought to identify and analyse patterns within the literature.

Overview of SLR studies

Explicit consideration of the marketing aspects of AFNs grew from one to two papers per year in 2010–2012, to an average of 7 papers per year for the period 2013–2020. More recently, interest appears less prevalent, with many of the more recent papers being

empirical case studies that contribute little to theory building or critically assessing AFNs' contribution to wider socio-economic and environmental challenges (Appendix 2, Table 1). Given the expansion in the number of journals and papers published each year (To & Yu, 2020), the dwindling number of AFN papers suggests a literature that has lost momentum.

Considering the whole period analysed, a minority of papers explicitly consider marketing aspects. Some of those focus on consumers as economic actors, for instance separating them into market segments and devising appropriate communications strategies (Pilař et al., 2019; Szabó & Juhász, 2015). Others take a broader approach, interested in consumers as social beings, seeking to understand patterns of co-operation and community building (Cherrier, 2017; Gollnhofer et al., 2019).

The literature considers a wide range of AFNs (Appendix 2, Table 2), with the greatest attention given to solidarity-based purchasing groups ($n = 14$), CSA ($n = 14$), farmers' markets ($n = 15$), self-provision, allotments, and community gardens ($n = 10$), and food co-operatives ($n = 19$). The literature also includes novel treatments of anti-mafia supply chains (Marin & Russo, 2016) as well as studies of food distribution to the homeless (Cherrier, 2017), dumpster diving and food sharing (Gollnhofer, 2017), and consumer redistribution of surplus food to reduce food waste (Zoll et al., 2024).

Italy ($n = 20$) accounts for more studies of the marketing aspects of AFNs than any other European country (Appendix 2, Table 3). Many of these studies address solidarity purchasing groups (Brunori et al., 2012; Cembalo et al., 2015; Fonte, 2013; Grasseni, 2014; Pascucci et al., 2016; Sacchi, 2018). Other prominent countries in the literature include the UK ($n = 10$), Germany ($n = 6$), Czechia ($n = 6$), France ($n = 5$), and Hungary ($n = 5$). The types of AFNs covered in country studies reflect cross-national differences in food industry structures and cultures (Kneafsey et al., 2013). For instance, in countries with many smallholdings (e.g. parts of Poland, Romania, and Bulgaria), short supply chains are ingrained in everyday rural life and informal networks of food provision remain salient. Consequently, studies conducted in Central and Eastern Europe typically consider traditional food markets and farmers' markets (Kopczyńska, 2017; Pilař et al., 2019; Spilková & Perlín, 2013; Szabó & Juhász, 2015) as well as self-provision and informal community sales (de Hoop & Jehlička, 2017; Smith & Jehlička, 2013). In Mediterranean countries, AFNs that involve intensive co-operation between producers and consumers (e.g. Q3, solidarity purchasing groups) are more prominent, fitting with food cultures that emphasise collective consumption of fresh, seasonal and local produce and shared meals (Fonte, 2013). In the UK, most studies focus on farmers' markets which largely operate independently of each other, within conventional supplier-buyer relationships (Michel, 2020).

Non-marketing journals account for most of the papers that consider marketing aspects of AFNs (Appendix 2, Table 4). The most common journals are the *Journal of Rural Studies* ($n = 14$) and *Sociologia Ruralis* ($n = 7$), with the authors of these papers largely based outside of business schools and marketing departments. As indicated earlier, the interest in AFNs from mainstream marketing journals has been scant, notwithstanding the notable exceptions of the *Journal of Marketing Management* ($n = 5$) and the *International Journal of Consumer Studies* ($n = 4$), as well as a small number of studies based on empirical work outside of Europe (e.g. Garner, 2019; Mars et al., 2023). In addition, the *Journal of Consumer Research* published a paper on dumpster diving/food sharing

Table 1. Agenda for future alternative food network (AFN) research.

Theme	Field of Interest	Relevant Quadrant (s) of Figure 1 (type of AFN)	Key Research Questions
(1) Participants' engagement with AFNs?	Membership dynamics	Q4	What factors explain quitting a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) venture or solidarity purchasing group? (Birtalan et al., 2020). How do interactions with friends and family motivate joining, staying, and leaving? (Birtalan et al., 2020; Pascucci et al., 2016).
	Patronage over time	Q1 and Q2	What are AFNs' customer retention rates and what factors explain loyalty? How does consumers' perception evolve during the customer journey? (Diekmann & Theuvsen, 2019)
	Participants other than producers and consumers	All	What participants other than producers and consumers are integral to the success of AFNs? Specifically, what supply chain relationships and infrastructure are required for successful AFNs?
	Service elements	All	How can service elements including education and knowledge transfer be enhanced to improve the attractiveness of AFNs to consumers? (Nikolaïdou et al., 2023). How can Q1 and Q2 AFNs improve service quality while maintaining authenticity and "soul" of the AFN?
(1) Differences in participant behaviours	Metrics		What metrics are appropriate for measuring engagement, and how do they vary with the type of AFN? (Kessari et al., 2020)
	Non-participation	All	What are the characteristics of non-AFN consumers and how easily can they be converted into engagers by different quadrants of AFNs? (Carzedda et al., 2018; Furness et al., 2022)
	Segment size	All	What is the size of different consumer segments, and how do they vary across countries? (Lund et al., 2013; Pilař et al., 2019; Zoll et al., 2021). How do values and psychographic characteristics vary across segments? (Zoll et al., 2018). What causes a segment to grow or diminish in size?
	Conflicts between different types of participants	Q4	How can the needs of activist engagers be reconciled with the needs and preferences of other participant types?
(1) Participant relationships within AFNs	Widening the appeal	Q1 & Q2	How can the customer base of AFNs be increased? How can the main barriers to greater engagement with AFNs, such as a lack of perceived convenience, be overcome? (Möllers et al., 2022; Zoll et al., 2024).
	C2C Relationships	All	How can AFNs build C2C relationships and Consumer-to-Producer (C2P) relations? What communications and activities best foster C2C and C2P relations?
	Trust in vendor/consumer relations	Q1 & Q2	How can vendor/buyer interactions be organized to foster trust and shared meaning?
	Trust	Q3 & Q4	How is trust generated in AFNs and how does it facilitate participant engagement (Thorsoe & Kjeldsen, 2016)

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued).

Theme	Field of Interest	Relevant Quadrant (s) of Figure 1 (type of AFN)	Key Research Questions
(1) How do AFNs survive and thrive?	Internal relations	All	How can AFNs ensure that they have better internal relations than those exhibited in conventional food systems? (Tregear, 2011). For instance, how can AFNs avoid poor pay, social and economic exclusion, unstable employment, and a lack of transparency?
	Structure of relationships	Q4	How does the distribution of ownership and property rights affect consumer-producer relationships in AFNs? (Opitz et al., 2019)
	Overcoming external resistance	Q3	How can AFNs overcome institutional arrangements and existing powerful actors which thwart achievement of their objectives? (Cherrier, 2017)
	Dark side	Q3 & Q4	How can the potential exploitation and disillusionment of participants be avoided, so that labour and sacrifices are rewarded adequately? How can internal conflicts be minimized?
	Distinctiveness	Q1 & Q2	How can AFNs remain distinctive in an environment in which conventional food retailers appear to many to address some of the environmental and community concerns which motivated interest in AFNs, and increasingly adopt the language and imagery of AFNs?
	Trade-offs	Q3 and Q4	How can AFNs achieve their economic and environmental objectives without social inequality and exclusion of poor consumers? (Fourat et al., 2020; Paddock, 2016)
	Transferability of business models	All	Can successful AFN business models be easily replicated in different countries? (Gollnhofer et al., 2019; Kopczyńska, 2017). What determines the degree of adaptation required? How can AFNs thrive in locations associated with industrial forms of food production (O'Neill, 2024)
	Co-ordination of communications	All	How can AFNs and third-party bodies coordinate their actions to influence narratives and achieve a unified voice?
	Branding	All	What are appropriate guidelines for AFNs in managing their branding? What are the lessons for the logos, message appeals and communications materials?
	Digital and blockchains	All	How can smart ICTs and digital communications boost the creation and functioning of AFNs? (Dansero & Puttilli, 2014). How can blockchains enhance AFNs' social capital, knowledge sharing and transparency (De Bernardi et al., 2019; Stephens & Barbier, 2021)
	Cross-AFN communication	All	How can AFNs communicate with each other, to share best practices (Balázs et al., 2016)
	Public se	Q3	How can AFN leaders/managers work effectively with public bodies, institutions and policymakers to achieve their objectives?
	The role of scale	Q1, Q2 & Q4	Does the appeal of AFNs to consumers depend on their scale and spatial specificity (Vittersø et al., 2019)? Can AFNs scale up without losing perceived distinctiveness, artisan appeal and alternativeness (Michel, 2020; Stephens & Barbier, 2021) or succumbing to bureaucratization (Pascucci et al., 2021)

consumer movements (Gollnhofer et al., 2019) and a conceptual article on alternative food consumption appeared in *Marketing Theory* (Batat et al., 2016). Only 17% of the papers included in the SLR (drawn from both the rural studies and marketing literatures) contained a section on managerial/practical implications, and remarkably few authors provide guidance for AFN operators and for some, as noted by Watts et al. (2018, p. 28), whether ‘they succeed or not is, arguably, beside the point’. Generally, the AFN literature is more interested in identities, motivations, and the need for social resistance, rather than strategies for action (Gollnhofer et al., 2019). Consequently, AFN practitioners and their advocates seeking actionable insights and means to support practical capacities for transformation are likely to be disappointed. Given its *raison d’être* to foster more socially and environmentally desirable practices of food provision, the lack of actionable insights for practitioners, after so many years of study, represents a mid-life crisis of legitimacy for AFN scholarship.

The most common research methods (Appendix 2, Table 5) utilised in the literature are interviews ($n = 34$) and surveys ($n = 22$). These overwhelmingly address existing customers and members of AFNs with very few attempts to capture the views of non-users - Cembalo et al. (2015) is a notable exception. Most of the data collected are cross-sectional in nature, with few longitudinal datasets. Only Lund et al. (2013) draw on panel survey data. Case studies ($n = 11$) and ethnographic/observation ($n = 10$) as well as archive/document analysis ($n = 8$) are also prevalent. In contrast to its prevalence in the marketing domain, only one study employs experiments (Teufer, Waiguny, & Grabner-Kräuter, 2023).

A very diverse set of theories underpin empirical research on AFNs (Appendix 2, Table 6). Prominent theories employed include practice/social practice theory ($n = 6$), community theory ($n = 4$) and actor network theory ($n = 3$). Theories relating to sustainability, ethical consumption, and consumer values and lifestyles also inform extant research. However, AFN studies to date largely ‘import’ models and concepts from elsewhere and have largely not influenced wider sociological and marketing theory (Xu, 2025).

Thematic analysis of AFN studies

Thematic analysis led to the identification of four themes which AFN scholarship, to date, has preoccupied itself with. These are: (i) what makes participants engage with AFNs; (ii) what differences exist in participant behaviours; (iii) how participants relate to each other within AFNs; and (iv) how AFNs survive/thrive in wider food systems. The rest of this section reports each theme, considering what the literature from both rural studies and marketing fields reveals, as well as identifying gaps in combined knowledge and inquiry.

Theme 1. What makes participants engage with AFNs?

Within the rural studies literature, papers largely investigate AFNs’ existing buyers and consumers, rather than those who choose not to engage. From these studies, two main reasons for engagement with AFNs can be identified: functional (both product- and service-related) and socio-political. Historically, the rural studies literature tended to emphasise the latter, though functional importance is also raised by more recent studies, often in connection with Q3 and Q4 AFN types described in Figure 1 (e.g. CSA, solidarity purchasing groups). Socio-political reasons include: a sense of belonging through

interactions with, and commitments to, others (Fourat et al., 2020; Watson & Ekici, 2017), heightened feelings of citizenship (Little et al., 2010), a desire to support local producers (Balázs et al., 2016; Blasi et al., 2015) and to retain and recycle capital within the community (Little et al., 2010).

In recent years, rural studies scholarship explores more of the functional reasons for consumers to engage in AFNs, particularly in relation to Q1 and Q2 AFN types (e.g. farmers' markets, subscription box schemes). These reasons are important not least for their role in motivating engagement over time (Fourat et al., 2020; Grasseni, 2014; Pascucci et al., 2016). They include product-related considerations, such as access to fresh, tasty, local and healthy produce (Balázs et al., 2016; Blasi et al., 2015; Carey et al., 2011; Carzedda et al., 2018; Cembalo et al., 2015; Giampietri et al., 2016; Möllers et al., 2022; Opitz et al., 2019), sometimes at more attractive prices than through other marketing channels (Fourat et al., 2020; Grasseni, 2014).

Importantly, functional reasons also include service-related aspects. For example, Carey et al. (2011) and Pilař et al. (2019) found many patrons regard visiting farmers' markets as an enjoyable leisure activity and a place to meet friends, so that their competitors are coffee shops, cafes, and alternative leisure destinations, rather than supermarkets. Likewise, Szabó and Juhász (2015) found consumers' dissatisfaction with farmers' markets had little to do with the physical food products, but rather service elements such as the availability of clean toilets and facilities for small children (Szabó & Juhász, 2015). Studies of fish box schemes also show that consumers, in addition to being motivated by the physical products, desire complementary materials, such as educative advice on how to prepare and cook different species (Vittersø et al., 2018), and background insights into fishers' activities (Le Velly & Dufeu, 2016). More widely, studies find that consumers are motivated to engage with AFNs through opportunities to learn (Klimek et al., 2021; Opitz et al., 2017). However, despite their importance to customer engagement, studies also reveal that producers often struggle with service-related aspects of AFNs. For example, Szabó and Juhász (2015) found that the vendors, despite having direct interactions with customers, lacked an accurate understanding of their requirements. This led to a substantial discrepancy between the service the customers expected and what they experienced, ultimately leading to dissatisfaction. AFN producers often lack an accurate understanding of their potential customers' needs and viewpoints (Ušča & Aļeksējeva, 2023), and may overestimate the degree to which they are trusted (Kopczyńska, 2017).

In the marketing contributions on AFNs, studies draw from the substantial literature on ethical and sustainable consumption, to investigate the shaping of alternative food consumption practices (e.g. Garner, 2019; Hwang & Kim, 2018; McEachern et al., 2010). This work supports the view that a mix of functional and socio-political attributes shape engagement with AFNs, and it reinforces the salience of functional attributes to consumer engagement and satisfaction. Marketing studies also contribute valuable insights, for example, regarding the role of personal values in responsible consumption (Valor & Carrero, 2014) and how peer groups influence individual perceptions and choices. For example, Godin and Sahakian (2018) show how some types of food system can be associated with values such as patriotism, which in turn leads to the casting of others, and other social groups, as 'faithfuls' or 'traitors' to the within-group system. Meanwhile, Batat et al. (2017) propose a set of allocentric (external) and idiocentric (internal) factors that shape consumer engagement in alternative food consumption, and in so doing,

reveal the structural and institutional factors that shape consumption choices. This work stands in contrast to the focus on functional aspects of AFNs found in the rural studies literature and its insights can enrich the latter.

The rural studies literature, however, also highlights the sacrifices consumers undertake in order to engage with AFNs. This is particularly in relation to Q4 types, such as CSA, community gardens, food teams, and food co-operatives (Crivits & Paredis, 2013). While engagement in such initiatives can yield fulfilling, joyful and caring experiences (Smith & Jehlička, 2013; Sovová & Veen, 2020; Veen et al., 2014; Zoll et al., 2024) that improve wellbeing (Sassatelli, 2015), as well as access to tasty and fresh produce (Migliore et al., 2019; Ušča & Aļeksējeva, 2023), this is far from universal. Specifically, production activities can be time consuming, physically demanding, and unpaid (O'Neill, 2024). Demand for labour can be high and inflexible, such as during summer when regular watering of community gardens and the processing of fresh products immediately at harvest to eschew chemical conservation, are required. Conflicts related to production and distribution decisions can arise, creating stress (Neulinger et al., 2020) and engagement can be difficult to combine with work and childcare commitments. For many, the effort related to CSA membership (e.g. picking up produce from a farm or depot, required changes in food preparation) is too much (Diekmann & Theuvsen, 2019; Zwart & Mathijs, 2020), with the early enthusiasm of new members waning, particularly during periods of the year when the product assortment is limited and/or unappealing (Diekmann & Theuvsen, 2019). The detailed evidence as to how and why consumers' initial enthusiasm fades, as documented in the rural studies' literature (e.g. Zwart & Mathijs, 2020), can inform consumer behaviour theories in marketing, which still often overemphasise linear adoption (Li et al., 2023) and fail to capture more complex patterns of customer journeys (Siebert et al., 2020).

Reflections

Historically, the rural studies literature tended to emphasise the socio-political reasons for consumers to engage with AFNs, overlooking the role of functional aspects. In more recent years, this gap has been addressed. However, although the importance of function, particularly service-related aspects, has been revealed, work is still needed to generate practical managerial insights into how to deliver success in practice. Such work is particularly needed for Q1 and Q2 AFN types, whose economic basis depends on the repeated custom/patronage of private citizens. Marketing scholarship includes a vast literature on services, which explores, for example, the factors determining customer retention rates, the nature of consumer journeys, and the ability of different service offerings to retain engagement (e.g. Siebert et al., 2020). However, with a few notable exceptions (e.g. McEachern et al., 2010), marketing studies rarely offer practical managerial guidance to AFNs. Research is needed at the interface of these sets of scholarship, to better theorise consumer perceptions of quality and satisfaction with AFNs, and to provide practical managerial advice on delivering them. This is particularly important to producers of Q1 and Q2 AFN types, who can be fixed in a goods-dominant logic which serves them ill in the context they operate in. Finally, the marketing literature largely pays little attention to the reasons why producers, or other actors besides consumers, engage in AFNs (exceptions include La Trobe, 2001). This has, for example, led to downplaying the importance of supply chain relationships and infrastructure to the success of AFNs. In future, research would be welcome which explores the engagement of all participants in AFNs, rather than

one set alone. This could involve embracing network-based relationship marketing theory (Möller & Halinen, 2000), to help conceptualise AFNs as the outcome of multiple sets of participants engaged in co-productions of value (Klimek et al., 2021). Related work on authenticity in relationship marketing could help practitioners improve their servicescape (Bitner, 1992), without undermining the 'soul' of an AFN.

Theme 2. What differences exist in participant behaviours?

As with Theme 1, the literature on AFN participant behaviours, and differences between them, focuses heavily on loyal consumers to the exclusion of others. As noted by Teufer, Waiguny, and Grabner-Kräuter (2023), early work on AFNs, within the rural studies field, tended to take a rather homogenised view of consumer behaviour. In recent years, however, studies highlight the diversity of patrons of all types of AFNs (Thorsøe & Kjeldsen, 2016; Viciunaite, 2023). Several studies also seek to characterise or classify different levels of engagement, with a view to explaining or predicting their distinct behaviours (Le Velly & Dufeu, 2016; Pilař et al., 2019; Szabó & Juhász, 2015; Viciunaite, 2023; Zoll et al., 2018). Synthesizing this evidence, five AFN consumer types can be identified, based on their level of engagement: activists, loyalists, infrequent engagers, disinterested, and sceptics. Next, we briefly profile each type:

Activists – these are AFN participants who instigate the creation and on-going running of AFNs (Schermer, 2015), acting as co-producers influencing product assortment and quantity decisions directly (Schermer, 2015). These participants are most often identified within Q3 AFN types, i.e. CSA, food co-operatives, food movements, and solidarity purchasing groups, rather than Q1/2 types such as farmers' markets. Activists seek to build communities of like-minded individuals (Balázs et al., 2016). Typically, they are highly critical of contemporary, conventional food systems, regarding them as unjust and unsustainable (Zoll et al., 2018, 2021), hence to challenge them is a moral imperative (Michel, 2020). Activists typically volunteer and undertake unpaid and often hidden work to support the AFN. This makes such a role unappealing to the vast majority of consumers (Ušča & Aļeksējeva, 2023). Consequently, the size of the activist type is very small. While having much in common, activists may hold different values, leading to internal conflicts regarding the objectives and purpose of an AFN (Klimek et al., 2021). While identified as important in the rural studies literature, such activists receive little attention in most marketing studies.

Loyalists – these AFN participants are regular customers, typically of Q1/2 AFN types, who perceive the AFN as providing healthy, tasty, local and fresh food from known producers for which they are willing to pay a premium (Balázs et al., 2016; Giampietri et al., 2016; Klimek et al., 2021). They tolerate typically lower levels of convenience compared to conventional food systems (Balázs et al., 2016; Giampietri et al., 2016; Zwart & Mathijs, 2020). However, this tolerance is not unlimited. Their patronage depends on the quality of the food, trust in the providers, and being compatible with household routines (Watts et al., 2018). Membership of this cluster skews to wealthier households, interested in the environmental and social impacts of what they eat as well as its nutritional properties (Cherrier, 2017; Dhaoui et al., 2020; Escobar-López et al., 2019; Hashem et al., 2018; Klimek et al., 2021; Weatherell et al., 2003) as well as 'fair' outcomes for farmers and workers (Dhaoui et al., 2020; Hashem et al., 2018; Sacchi, 2018). However, in contrast to activists,

they do not actively participate in AFN decision making and readily buy also from conventional retailers (Watts et al., 2018). Most consumer research on AFNs from both domains implicitly focuses on this segment.

Infrequent engagers – these consumers are supportive of an AFN's objectives (typically Q1/2 AFNs), but engagement is infrequent due to perceived trade-offs with other objectives like convenience, accessibility, variety, and price. These represent substantial barriers to participation from this group (Balázs et al., 2016; Dhaoui et al., 2020; Lund et al., 2013; Möllers et al., 2022). This type is much larger in size than activists or loyalists. A desire to reshape food system relations is not a primary motivation (Veen et al., 2014). Infrequent engagers typically wish to support local farmers and quality food producers in principle (European Commission, 2022) but they may have limited desire for personal connections in practice (Papaoikonomou & Ginieis, 2017). More regular engagement depends on improving accessibility, convenience, and perceived customer value (Dhaoui et al., 2020; Möllers et al., 2022; Zoll et al., 2018). Service elements such as the nature of opening hours, availability of washrooms and seating are often important but underappreciated by producers and advocates (Szabó & Juhász, 2015). Upscaling AFNs depends on increasing engagement with this segment, but their pragmatic concerns are typically overlooked.

Disinterested – these consumers have little interest in the provenance of food and certification (Escobar-López et al., 2019), have low levels of critical food literacy (Batat et al., 2016) and exhibit weak inclination to improve their food knowledge (Viciunaite, 2023). They typically find meal preparation a chore, often believing that takeaway and ready meals provide a superior solution to their needs (Cembalo et al., 2015). Engagement with AFNs is likely to be low/accidental. In many countries this group is substantial in size (Honkanen & Frewer, 2009), underlining the limitations of purely consumer-led initiatives for food system transformation. Although a sizeable group, both literatures often overlook this segment, sometimes leading to over-generalised and rosy assessments of consumer interest in AFNs.

Sceptics – this group distrusts food producers, retailers and regulatory agencies (Lund et al., 2013) and regards AFNs' social, political and community objectives as merely masking producers' desires to charge higher prices. Such views appear consistent with more widespread scepticism towards established actors and authority figures, which fuels the backlash politics of populist parties (Zapp, 2022). Polling evidence suggests that confirmed sceptics currently account for a tiny minority of food shoppers (European Commission, 2022). Nevertheless, there is a lack of studies in both domains of such sceptics, which with the rise of populist parties, deserve greater attention and engagement.

Although the previously detailed classification of AFN consumers is based primarily on one criterion (engagement level), which does not capture all salient factors shaping decision making, it highlights the diversity of consumers' behavioural investments in AFNs, and how these are linked to distinct cognitive and emotional perspectives.

In the marketing literature, many studies present consumer profiles or typologies relating to ethical or sustainable consumption (e.g. Diamantopoulos et al., 2003; McEachern & McClean, 2002; Megicks et al., 2012; Park, 2018). Such classifications highlight how ethical or conscious consumers are heterogenous. However, in the marketing literature, such typologies have rarely been directed towards participants of AFNs, as research on the latter tends to be more exploratory and qualitative in nature.

Nevertheless, studies of ethical/sustainable consumption provide a useful perspective on consumer engagement as a flexible continuum rather than a fixed state (e.g. McDonald et al., 2006). Accordingly, the goal of producers or managers of alternative markets can be envisaged as shifting patrons from a 'festival' dialectic, where visits to markets are viewed as extraordinary, to an 'economic' dialectic, where market visits become part of everyday provisioning behaviour (Sherry, 1990). Furthermore, the work by Godin and Sahakian (2018) and Batat et al. (2017) highlight the role of values in shaping consumption choices, opening up the possibility for developing new classifications of AFN participants, based on psychographic criteria, for example.

Reflections

The efforts to classify consumer engagement are a welcome contribution. First, they help to build appreciation of AFN consumption behaviours as heterogenous, which highlights, for example, that sizeable consumer groups are at best indifferent to AFNs in their food-buying repertoires. This provides a counterbalance to AFN studies from both domains that overwhelmingly sample existing members and customers, and therefore risk drawing overly optimistic conclusions. Second, it highlights that consumption choice is a dynamic process, and that individuals' commitment to AFNs can wax and wane over life stages and circumstances. The results of cross-sectional studies therefore need to be treated with caution, and to develop these understandings, future research should proactively seek views from less engaged and lapsed AFN consumers, as well as take more longitudinal perspectives. A third way in which classification studies are helpful is through their potential to inform managerial strategies for AFNs, by building constructively on identified differences between consumers. For example, the typologies highlight how the needs of AFN activists and infrequent engagers can often be incompatible. For instance, appeals to subvert mainstream consumerism, which may attract activists (Pottinger, 2013), can risk alienating infrequent engagers. To date however, little work in either the rural studies or marketing literatures focuses directly on managerial insights for customer relationship management. Collaborative research between the two disciplines could be a powerful way of addressing this gap, to generate evidence regarding which participant bases are needed for AFNs to be viable, and how to reconcile those which have incompatibilities in needs and preferences.

Theme 3. How do participants relate to each other in AFNs?

The third theme concerns the ways in which participants interact and build relations with each other. The SLRs reveal the complex nature of participant relations in AFNs, a feature common to all AFN types depicted in Figure 1.

In the rural studies literature, effective communications are revealed as vital for the development of strong participant relations within AFNs. Research into members' preferences in CSA, for example, reveals that participants generally want to meet producers face to face to understand the food production process and how their financial contributions are used (Zoll et al., 2021). They desire regular written updates, which enhance bonding social capital (Furness et al., 2022). While digital communications may support the latter (De Bernardi et al., 2019; Stephens & Barbier, 2021; Viciunaite, 2023), these should be in addition to, rather than a substitute for, face-to-face farm visits (Zoll et al.,

2021). A further feature important to the development of effective AFN participant relations is the building of strong consumer-to-consumer (C2C) interactions and knowledge sharing, particularly on-site (De Bernardi et al., 2019). These relations help to foster a stronger sense of community within AFNs, which in turn stimulates more sustainable purchasing and consumption behaviours. However, the importance of building of C2C relations is often unappreciated by AFN producers/managers, or sometimes even resented (Furness et al., 2022; Zoll et al., 2021). Overall, contributions show how effective communication is vital for building the community element of AFNs, which in turn is an important source of value.

Within the rural studies literature, scholars also caution against overgeneralised assumptions that AFNs always embody more equitable, ethical, or just internal relations than those exhibited in conventional food systems (Zoll et al., 2021). AFNs can be beset by poor pay, social and economic exclusion, unstable employment, and a lack of transparency (Moragues-Faus & Marsden, 2017). This darker underbelly of AFN market relations includes, for instance, questions about animal welfare, waste, and culinary culture, the inevitable market mediations and devices that persist equally in AFNs, and the role of class culture in AFN consumerism and exclusion of marginalised actors and voices. In addition, regulation of production and implementation of standards in some AFNs is also absent. This means that while producers may trumpet green or organic claims, these sometimes lack verification and can be dubious (Sovová & Veen, 2020). Finally, while many individual AFNs yield substantial economic, social, and environmental benefits (Malak-Rawlikowska et al., 2019), these often remain unquantified and difficult to communicate (Fourat et al., 2020). Overall, given their diversity of structures and goals in terms of reaching out to excluded groups, caution is needed when making claims about the nature of internal relations within AFNs.

Marketing scholarship grapples with the concepts of commitment and trust within exchange relationships (Brown et al., 2019; Morgan & Hunt, 1994). This work offers insights into the mechanisms by which relationships develop, or weaken, between participants within a market or collaboration. Marketing scholars draw from economic theories, e.g. transaction costs (Thorelli, 1986) and theories of collective action (Ostrom, 1998), to explain the outcomes of prosocial initiatives (Joann Peck et al., 2021). Their application could help to explain how and why significant proportions of consumers are not active engagers in AFNs, and/or the structural and institutional barriers to their development.

Marketing studies which tackle AFNs include an investigation by Cherrier (2017) regarding the redistribution of surplus food to homeless people. This reveals how the relationships between participating actors are put under strain, when the initiative pushes against prevailing social norms and the institutional arrangements of powerful participants. Two further studies by marketing scholars reveal important insights into the ways in which participants relate to one another in AFNs, specifically Q1 types (farmers' markets). In one, Garner (2019) reveals the nuanced nature of vendors' interactions with consumers, created by the lack of a clear, shared understanding of what is meant by 'sustainable' food. The study shows how vendors learn to acquiesce to the varied perceptions of different customers in order to build liking and trust, and thereby increase their custom. In contrast, Mars et al. (2023), find that farmers' market vendors perceive themselves as having a more active educator role when interacting with their customers,

however they struggle with similar confused and conflated meanings around 'alternativeness', which pervade their setting.

Reflections

Overall, the AFN literature, both from rural studies and marketing disciplines, points to the complex nature of relationships between AFN participants. This holds true for all the AFN types depicted in [Figure 1](#). However, studies indicate that Q1/2 types face specific challenges around vendor/buyer interactions and the development of trust and shared meaning. Q3/4 types confront challenges concerning the potential exploitation and disillusionment of participants, where 'labour' and sacrifices are not rewarded adequately. Research from both disciplines also cautions against overgeneralised assumptions about the capacity of all AFNs to deliver enhanced socio-economic and/or environmental outcomes compared with conventional food systems. In terms of research gaps, Theme 3 is a further example of a research strand in need of more practical guidance, to help AFN managers to overcome the internal relations challenges, to build commitment and trust, as well as how to minimise the risk of 'dark side' tendencies emerging (Daunt & Greer, 2017). More collaborative work between rural studies and marketing would be beneficial, particularly drawing on the former's detailed evidence for generating grounded theories of the dark side of attempts to foster non-conventional exchange relationships.

Theme 4. How do AFNs survive/thrive in wider food systems?

The fourth theme contemplates and analyses the position of AFNs in the wider food system, and the extent to which AFNs are inherently at risk of threat or erosion from mainstream or conventional food businesses and competitors. In the rural studies literature, AFNs are often portrayed as peripheral initiatives, vulnerable to being crushed by corporate actors (Goodman et al., 2012). For example, small-scale and values-based AFNs typically struggle to compete, on cost terms at least, with more centralised retail-driven just-in-time supply chains (Guthman, 2008). Nevertheless, as Ilbery and Maye (2005) point out, there is a danger of crudely bifurcating food systems into 'alternative' vs 'conventional', as in reality, food systems can exhibit features, logics, and values of both. Furthermore, employing the concept of bricolage, Xu (2025) notes how AFNs improvise with the available resources, to survive in mainstream markets. While the latter necessitates some compromises, AFNs may still deliver meaningful socio-economic and environmental benefits (Xu, 2025).

As most consumers lack the knowledge and engagement to discern deeply the ways in which AFNs are different to conventional alternatives, they rely on impersonal communication mechanisms, such as brands, certifications, and labels, to guide their consumption choices (Teufer, Waiguny, & Grabner-Kräuter, 2023). These are a key source of difficulty for AFNs and their viability within mainstream food systems, particularly for Q1 and Q3 AFN types. Research highlights that consumer understanding of food production processes and quality attributes is generally patchy (Nikolaidou et al., 2023; Teufer, Waiguny, & Grabner-Kraeute, 2023). Moreover, consumer misunderstanding and confusion surrounding food labels, both those specific to AFNs and beyond, remains high (Moon et al., 2017). This means that, for example, fictional labels are often more persuasive than official certification schemes (Teufer & Grabner-Kräuter, 2023). Participatory

engagement processes, bringing together producers and consumers, can increase consumers' awareness, understanding and appreciation of AFNs (Nikolaidou et al., 2023). However, while participatory consumer-producer interactions stimulate social learning, questions remain regarding the willingness and practical ability of engaging both producers and consumers in this manner. Cost-effective ways to improve consumers' critical food literacy en masse remain elusive.

The rural studies literature also highlights that a key challenge for AFNs is how to remain distinctive in an environment in which conventional food retailers address, at least superficially, some of the environmental and community concerns which motivate interest in AFNs. For example, the rise in availability of organic foods in supermarkets squeezed demand for organic box schemes (Schermer, 2015). Moreover, multiple retailers increasingly co-opt the imagery of AFNs in their promotional materials, for example, through featuring specific farmers who supply them (Jackson et al., 2007). In fact, one of the main impacts of AFNs has been to shape the ways in which large retailers and agribusinesses create narratives about their products and suppliers (Guthman, 2004). In this regard the experience of AFNs fits an often-witnessed historical pattern of established actors appropriating some features of challengers to maintain their hegemony (Guthman, 2004). The supermarkets' tactics often appear successful - Dansero and Puttilli (2014, p. 628) argue that consumers perceive a *'gradual convergence between AFNs and conventional forms of production and consumption, increasingly focused on intercepting consumer preference as regards quality, safety and specificity of food products'*. This makes distinctiveness, a key requirement for an attractive customer value proposition (Payne et al., 2017), tricky. Moreover, for AFN exponents to imply, either explicitly or implicitly, that the patrons of supermarkets are irresponsible is unlikely to improve matters (Sacchi, 2018), particularly amongst the pragmatic shoppers that some AFNs need to attract in order to grow.

In marketing scholarship, theories and concepts from institutional economics have been employed to help explain the competitiveness of small or niche providers in a market. One example is the concept of information asymmetry (Akerlof, 1970), which provides a way of predicting when and how 'alternative' providers in a market, offering goods/services of superior quality, can be at a disadvantage. Furthermore, theories of performativity help understand the relationships between scientific and technical practices in exchange relationships (Callon & Roth, 2021). Both approaches could be applied to AFNs to help understand competitive disadvantages and potential strategies for overcoming them (e.g. narrative performance, expertise and authority construction) (Mason et al., 2015).

Effective communications are essential for AFNs to survive and thrive. Some research addresses the effectiveness of different message appeals for promoting AFNs. It establishes that consumers regard 'alternative' as a confusing descriptor – what for some is alternative, others regard as commonplace (Dhaoui et al., 2020). Furthermore, Diekmann and Theuvsen (2019) explore how to market CSA to non-members. They conclude that hedonic appeals emphasising pleasure and fulfilment on a personal level alongside associations with pro-environmental behaviour, are superior to appeals that emphasise sustainability alone or which portray the transformative power of a CSA. These results highlight that AFN non-members are often sceptical that their actions can lead to substantial food system transformation (Zoll et al., 2018). Moreover regarding communications, while most AFNs operate at a local level, and access to fresh, local food is often the strongest message appeal (Michel, 2020), local is also a fuzzy descriptor (Hopkinson,

2017). Operating at such a local scale increases the vulnerability of an AFN, through for example failure to realise economies of scale, constraining the potential impacts it might have. Yet, if the initiative grows spatially there is a danger of weakening the message appeal and the AFN losing credibility (Papaoikonomou & Ginieis, 2017).

A recent study by Mars et al. (2023), in the marketing scholarship field, has much in common with rural studies' perspectives on the vulnerability of AFNs, but explains it through the lens of producer narratives. The authors present analysis of the narratives provided by competing groups in the local food space. The two sides are farmers' market vendors, and supermarket chains. The authors propose that incumbents in a market, such as supermarkets in the emerging trend for local food, have resource and power advantages which allows them to appropriate narratives relating to the trend, and adapt them to their own marketing, and in turn have a business advantage. New entrants, in this case farmers' market vendors, are at a disadvantage regarding resources and the ability to curate the narrative to their own interests. This is because they are not mobilised into a unified voice. As the outcome is supermarket control of the narrative, consumers never appreciate the value of the alternative option, which remains marginalised. Consequently, vendors need to coordinate their actions better, achieving a unified voice, rather than seeking to persuade every prospective customer, face to face, one at a time (Micha et al., 2022). The authors also advocate the use of third-party bodies to help curate the narrative on behalf of AFN members, to give it weight and legitimacy. Without these actions, the authors contend that mainstream actors will always be able to appropriate, adapt and therefore control the narratives around alternativeness (in this case, 'local' food), leaving AFNs to be forever marginalised.

Finally, there is a large literature in marketing and nutrition studies concerning impersonal communications like labelling, and their effects and limitations as heuristic devices (Vega-Zamora et al., 2014). These studies generate important practical insights regarding, for example, how logo design, use of colours, fonts, and the choice environment affects consumer decisions (e.g. Sousa et al., 2020; Zou & Liu, 2019). While not commonly applied to AFNs such learnings from the marketing literature can provide actionable insights.

Reflections

Both the rural studies and marketing literatures generally agree that AFNs are in a vulnerable position compared to established actors in the mainstream food system. However, the rural studies literature offers more reflections on the ways in which AFNs can straddle and interpolate the 'alternative' and 'conventional' food system, which gives insights into the entrepreneurialism and agentic power AFN actors may possibly wield (Ilbery & Maye, 2005; Marin & Russo, 2016). In terms of future research, like all preceding themes, there is a need for more work on the strategic and tactical principles which can help AFNs to compete in contemporary markets. This includes more guidance on effective communications with consumers, how to curate and control meta-narratives, and how to collaborate to develop a more unified voice – all important concerns within marketing scholarship (Beverland & Farrelly, 2010). Studies which analyse cases of AFNs that have succeeded in these imperatives would be very helpful. Research into the ways in which AFN leaders/managers can work effectively with public bodies, institutions and policy-makers is also needed. This is particularly the case for Q3/4 AFN types, where multi-stakeholder relations are a common feature.

Discussion and research agenda

Having reviewed the key themes tackled by AFN scholarship since 2010, and identified important gaps and tensions, what have we discovered about the current status of knowledge in this field? Is it suffering from a mid-life crisis? Based on our analysis, the AFN literature continues to make progress in some areas but has lost momentum in others. First, we find that scholars generally now accept AFNs as hybrid systems (Misleh, 2022; O'Neill, 2014; Xu, 2025), and ongoing work explores in depth how participants behave within such systems. In some cases, research draws from theoretical lenses already well established in the AFN literature, e.g. sociology of markets (Le Velly & Dufeu, 2016), while others are drawing from more novel perspectives for the AFN field, e.g. bricolage (Xu, 2025), alternative economic practices (Rosol, 2020), and social innovation (Zoll et al., 2021). However, we argue that progress has stalled in terms of understanding how AFN actors address the threats of mainstream food systems taking on trappings of AFNs but failing to deliver necessary improvements in socio-economic and environmental outcomes. Mars et al. (2023) is a notable exception to this.

In terms of the development of more critical work on AFNs (era 2 in Misleh, 2022), we find that AFN scholarship continues to progress, including through a broadening of the critical scope. This includes consideration of injustices in labour relations and workforce exploitation, and disparities in access to natural resources and land (Bruce & Som Castellano, 2017). Established theoretical lenses continue to underpin such work, such as political economy and to a lesser extent political ecology (Moragues-Faus & Marsden, 2017), but also gender and ethnicity perspectives are emerging. At the same time, Faltmann and Stotten (2025) document the co-existence of a large body of less critical work in the field.

Regarding research into the goal leanings and outcomes of AFNs (era 3 in Misleh, 2022), the turn towards valuing diverse AFN outcomes, beyond the economic prosperity of producers, has stalled somewhat. Although recognition of the imperative for AFNs to promote environmental justice widens, much of the literature continues to be preoccupied with social justice debates and benefits to producers (Poças Ribeiro et al., 2021). Where environmental justice is considered, it is often conceptualised as a by-product of socially just, proximate (i.e. local) human relations (Faltmann & Stotten, 2025; Moragues-Faus & Marsden, 2017).

In view of the above, we propose a revised typology of AFNs, along adjusted dimensions (Figure 3). On the horizontal axis is the extent to which AFNs have the potential to capture novel relations, which can relate to market structures, governance arrangements, and/or the values espoused by AFN actors. On the vertical axis is the extent to which AFNs have potential to contribute to one or more of three goals: economic prosperity (typically from a producer perspective), social justice and environmental justice. In the shaded area are the types of AFN which have the greatest potential for food system transformation, being those with most novelty in structural/relational features, and which contribute to outcomes other than producer prosperity. At the same time, according to our review, the shaded area also represents the types of AFN where scholarly investigation has stalled somewhat, or which are yet to be explored.

We now consider the priorities for future research in the field, building on the preceding discussion of the current state of knowledge. Our review unveils how the relationship between rural studies and marketing scholarship remains semi-detached. Looking ahead, both could gain from greater interaction. The Marketing Science Institute (2022), in its

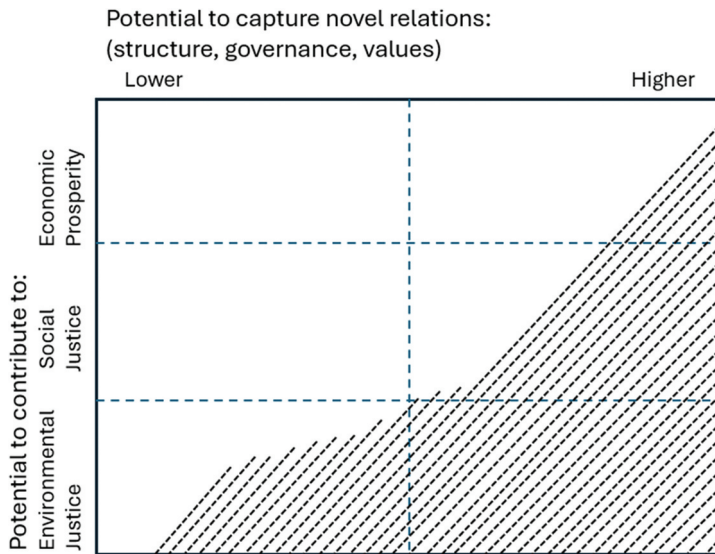


Figure 3. Revised classification of AFN types.

influential guide to research priorities for 2022–24, calls for greater attention to Direct-To-Consumer, subscription services, alternative supply chain strategies, responsible production and consumption, brand purpose, political ideology, and ethical forms of exchange. Considerable empirical work in the rural studies' AFN literature addresses these topics. In particular, the latter provides detailed data concerning experiments in social innovation (Zoll et al., 2024) and the opportunities and problems encountered in revising business models to improve social, environment and community outcomes (Foti & Timpanaro, 2021; Randelli & Rocchi, 2017), as well as the limitations of purely consumer-led initiatives. At the very least, AFNs are a stark reminder that the existence of an alternative does not in itself enact transformative practices (Giordano et al., 2018). These experiences can inform mainstream marketing debates, which increasingly seek to re-evaluate marketing's role in addressing issues of social relevance, seeking to avoid the discipline 'becoming detached from many of the most important challenges facing the world today' (Chandy et al., 2021, p. 1).

Table 1, drawing on the SLR, presents avenues for future research. It collates research questions, organised by theme. Some questions are from the suggestions for further research sections of the reviewed papers, others added by the authors of this paper, emerging out of review. Some questions cut across the different types of AFN, as depicted in Figure 1, while others relate to specific forms of AFN. Where research questions relate to a specific quadrant (type of AFN), this is marked in Table 1. It is intended that all the research questions have practical relevance.

Conclusions

AFNs, born out of a 1980s crisis in agriculture, are experiments in novel food provision (Roep & Wiskerke, 2012), which spawned considerable interest amongst rural studies' academics, but remain largely hidden in marketing scholarship. To date, cross-fertilisation of concepts

and evidence across the two disciplines remains limited. However, cross-disciplinary engagement can and should go further. Specifically, some work in mainstream marketing journals, while well intentioned, presents overly optimistic assessments of the ability of consumer led initiatives to deliver 'win-win-win' benefits, without trade-offs and tensions, for producers, communities, and the environment (Hult, 2011). The rural studies literature, particularly in the work of Chiffolleau et al. (2019) and Zoll et al. (2021), presents detailed, empirical evidence regarding these problems, and can help overcome naïve optimism. Meanwhile the rural studies literature would benefit from engagement with marketing scholarship on service provision, relationship marketing, supply chain relationships, communications, and branding, which are integral to successful AFNs in practice.

De-siloing literatures can help reinvigorate AFN research, but it is not the only requirement for the latter. The SLR found only a small proportion of all AFN studies offered practical, managerial recommendations for marketing or pragmatic actions for food system transformation. These limitations contribute to a mid-life crisis for AFN research given its motivation from the outset to foster fairer food systems (Marsden et al., 2000). Myopia over practical considerations may reflect a wider issue in academia that such contributions are less appealing to leading journals. Whether this is a fair assessment is beyond the remit of this review, but there is a pressing need to valorise, theorise and legitimise practical contributions, and at the very least, to find esteemed outlets for academic contributions that help the world of practice. This is integral to universities' impact and civic functions. AFNs provide an exemplary case of a non-academic activity that can benefit from both scholars' theoretical and practical contributions.

Reinvigorating AFN research also requires scholars to continue to be self-reflexive and relate their work to wider sustainability challenges and responsibilities (Arnold et al., 2022). Early rural studies' research tended to implicitly assume that all AFNs were equally worthy of attention, and should be championed as such, overlooking, for example, the environmental impacts of livestock production (Murdoch & Miele, 1999). If an AFN failed to deliver on an aspect of sustainability, this was often ascribed to market pressures (e.g. cost-price squeeze), or management incompetence or inexperience, rather than an inherent feature. In the current century, humanity faces existential threats regarding the planet's capacity to feed its growing population, requiring new solutions to food systems. AFNs can be part of the solution, but the SLR helps reveal that, without revision or improvement, at least some AFNs will deliver little towards required dietary, land use, and social transitions (Malak-Rawlikowska et al., 2019). AFN research should acknowledge this and engage with these imperatives, to regain its purpose (Batat et al., 2017). In so doing, and returning to the title of this paper, opportunities exist for mutual learning, addressing research gaps, and making practical contributions, which can reinvigorate the AFN literature at the age of forty.

Note

1. Being based on only two dimensions, the typology is a simplification of more complex reality. The intention is to bring to the fore key drivers of heterogeneity in AFNs, which give rise to differences in goals and managerial challenges that are often overlooked in the literature.

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Appendix 1: Summary of studies included in the Systematic Literature Review

No.	Authors	Type of AFN	Objective	Methodology	Country	Theory	Findings	Limitations/further research
1	Little et al. (2010)	Collective buying/food purchasing groups	Introduce a framework for analysing local and organic buying groups	Interviews and supporting documentary analysis	USA, Europe, Japan	Diverse economies	Collective purchase which, as a latent form of grassroots innovation, can be a means to scale up Alternative Food Networks (AFNs). Buying groups way of regaining control within food system.	Understanding of consumer motivations and ethics in buying groups
2	McEachern et al. (2010)	Farmers' Markets	Identify whether conscious consumers are committed to buying local and supporting farmers' markets	Interviews with 'conscious' consumers	UK	The conscious consumer	Conscious consumers recognise their own limitations (i.e. time, convenience, and price). Integrating ethical considerations into their consumption behaviour is a complex and flexible task. Farmers' markets should capitalise on perceptions of authenticity and locality	Undertake cross-cultural comparison of conscious consumers from France, Italy, and Spain, where farmers' markets are not necessarily an 'alternative' grocery-shopping option.

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No.	Authors	Type of AFN	Objective	Methodology	Country	Theory	Findings	Limitations/further research
3	Carey et al. (2011)	Farmers' Markets	Understanding the motivations of Farmers' Markets shoppers	Intercept survey of shoppers at 4 farmers markets	UK (Scotland)	Theory of Planned Behaviour	Freshness of food, resource conservation, enjoyment of cooking and the nutritional and health value of the produce purchased are the prime motivations for attending a farmers' market. Urban shoppers have more positive attitude than rural	Calls for qualitative work to deepen understanding of motivations
4	Tregear (2011)	General assessment	Critical assessment of AFN research	Conceptual	n/a	Political economy, rural development, network perspective	Inconsistent use of concepts and terms, conflation of the structural characteristics of food systems with desired outcomes, insufficient acknowledgement of trading problems, lack of a consumer perspective	Incorporate a greater cross-fertilisation of ideas from different theoretical perspectives; greater attention to conceptual and ontological positions; new methods which go beyond case studies
5	Brunori et al. (2012)	Solidarity-based purchasing groups	Understand consumers' evolving attitudes and behaviour	Email and other document analysis	Italy	Transition management theory	Consumers can play a transformative role, creating new discourses, narratives, relational and material infrastructures for consumption	

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No.	Authors	Type of AFN	Objective	Methodology	Country	Theory	Findings	Limitations/further research
6	Crivits and Paredis (2013)	Food teams	To elaborate an explanatory framework for the role of consumption practices in transitions to (enhanced) sustainability in the food system	Interviews and Focus groups	Belgium	Practice theory	The socio-cultural dimension (i.e. ideology) actively co-determines how a certain practice is reproduced. Consumer activities are a dynamic and complex set of routines and activities with an internal logic	Apply the same model to understand the supply side
7	Fonte (2013)	Solidarity-based purchasing groups	Examine the discourses and practices of the group	Interviews	Italy	Practice theory	Discursive consciousness about the dominant food regime's unsustainability translates into practical criteria for buying food directly from farmers	Importance of transport networks
8	Lund et al. (2013)	Organic foods	Provide organic consumers and views of producers	Focus groups, interviews, household panel data, household panel survey	Denmark	Customer segmentation	Identifies six consumers' segments ranging from convinced to sceptics. Recent increases in purchasing frequencies are not due to attitudinal changes but increased availability of a more differentiated range of products.	Examine if the differential character of demand in Denmark is peculiar to the Danish case or is characteristic of mature organic markets more generally
9	Marsden and Franklin (2013)	General assessment	Review developments for alternative agri-food scholarship	Critical review		Communities of Food practice	AFNs becoming major social and political vehicles for embedding and creating the means of transitions to the post-neoliberal economy	

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No.	Authors	Type of AFN	Objective	Methodology	Country	Theory	Findings	Limitations/further research
10	Pottinger (2013)	Urban AFNs: Community Support Agriculture (CSA), farmers' markets	Theorise ethical consumption in cities	Conceptual		Reconnection, place frames, landscapes of consumption	Ethical food consumption in cities takes myriad forms. Reconnecting urban consumers with processes of production achieved through individual consumers' direct immersion	Focus future research at the intersection of urban food and central geographical concepts of space, place, scale and landscape
11	Smith and Jehlička (2013)	Self-provision	Understand the extent and motivations for food self-provisioning	Surveys and interviews	Poland and Czechia		Self-provisioning motivated by access to fresh, healthy food but also delivers social and environmental benefits	
12	Spilková and Perlin (2013)	Farmers' Markets	Critically evaluate the potential of farmers' markets (FMs)	Interviews	Czechia		FMs represent a new phenomenon both as a new form of sale and as a means to enliven public space in cities.	Understand the effect of FMs on rural areas
13	Dansero and Puttilli (2014)	Assorted	Analyse AFNs in Piedmont through the lens of territoriality	Case studies	Italy	Territorial models	AFNs are able to transform themselves and adapt. Due to their heterogeneity and complexity, AFNs cease to be a simple niche, in other words antagonistic experiences fighting against a dominant system.	How do public policies affect movements which often develop in a self-organised form, and what forms of territoriality do they support the most? How can smart ICTs boost the creation and functioning of AFNs?
14	Grasseni (2014)	Solidarity-based purchasing groups	Present a case study of the solidarity economy in Italy	Survey and ethnography	Italy	Political-ecological networks	Solidarity Purchase Groups reconnect the crisis-affected lower-middle class with a smallholder agriculture	

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No.	Authors	Type of AFN	Objective	Methodology	Country	Theory	Findings	Limitations/further research
15	O'Neill (2014)	Alternative and local food systems (ALFS)	Challenge conceptualisations of local food as linked only to non-intensive agricultural regions	Interviews and Focus groups	England		AFNs interact with the conventional food system in complex and multiple ways and in industrial farming regions challenge perceptions about where they develop.	Investigate ALFS in other intensive agricultural areas
16	Veen et al. (2014)	Urban food growing initiatives	Explore how urban food growing gets interwoven with other areas of life	Case studies	Netherlands	Practice theory	Members of the AFNs are involved in the practice of shopping. Whether members are involved in shopping or growing impacts the degree to which they manage to integrate the harvest in their daily meals.	Are allotments AFNs because they manage to effectuate actual changes, even if gardeners are not necessarily trying to reshape relations with the food system?
17	Blasi et al. (2015)	Short food supply chains	Compare the development of alternative markets in Trentino with other Italian peri-urban areas.	Survey	Italy		Alternative food markets are meaningful for the survival and development of the local agricultural sector	Further research needed in mountain areas
18	Cembalo et al. (2015)	Solidarity-based purchasing groups	Understand why consumers are increasingly participating in AFNs to co-produce and distribute foods with farmers	Survey of solidarity purchasing group members and non-members	Italy	Consumer values and food-related lifestyles	AFN engagers less motivated by convenience and more with acquiring natural products	Access determinants of engagement across a range of geographical contexts

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No.	Authors	Type of AFN	Objective	Methodology	Country	Theory	Findings	Limitations/further research
19	Krzywoszynska (2015)	Organic and artisan wine production	Understand if the marketisation of ecologically embedded edibles can be enabled in AFNs	Ethnography	Italy	Economy of qualities	AFNs can circulate food and drinks which are ecologically embedded.	Who should have the power to structure food education and agro-food systems? What kind of norms should underpin this structuring?
20	Sassatelli (2015)		Considers the cultural representation of consumption and the consumer	Conceptual	n/a	Political consumerism	Argues for the emergence and consolidation of a relational, responsible vision of consumer sovereignty	Consider anew our relation to the world of commodities on both the production side and the consumption side
21	Schermer (2015)	CSA/Food co-ops	Why CSA and food co-ops are poorly developed in Austria	Narrative	Austria	Food regime theory	Currently no social movements challenge the dominating food relations	
22	Szabó and Juhász (2015)	Food markets	Understand expected and experienced quality, and gaps between producer and consumer evaluations	Producer and consumer surveys	Hungary	SERVQUAL	Consumers had higher expectations than those they usually experienced when visiting markets	
23	Balázs et al. (2016)	Community Supported Agriculture (CSA)	Understand the dynamics of CSA in Hungary	Case studies	Hungary		CSAs create democratic spaces of direct producer-consumer co-operation and present a model for rethinking our food system. However, upscaling a problem	Sharing best practices to ensure farmers fair return and secure income

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No.	Authors	Type of AFN	Objective	Methodology	Country	Theory	Findings	Limitations/further research
24	Batat et al. (2016)		Brainstorming overarching themes for furthering research on 'alternative' consumption and wellbeing	Conceptual	n/a	Literacy, Bourdieu	AFC is an ongoing project of an individual acquiring food knowledge and empowering themselves by examining societal resource allocation, institutional practices, and economic and social conditions that shape individuals' and communities' control over food and alternative food adoption.	The meaning of alternative is shaped by reference to the ideology of a particular sociocultural context.
25	Giampietri et al. (2016)	Farmers' Markets	Provide insights into how consumers' sustainability concerns are related to their motivation for shopping at FMs.	Survey (choice experiment)	Italy	Utility theory	Local origin, point of sale, product damage and price explain consumers' choices but not production method	Experiment was hypothetical in nature and calls for research using experimental auctions/revealed preference methods
26	Le Velly and Dufeu (2016)	Fish boxes	Show Actor-Network Theory's (ANT) potential for accounting for the alternative-conventional hybridity of alternative food networks.	Interviews, observation, archive analysis	France	Actor-Network Theory	Alternative food networks are composed of a mixture of alternative and conventional 'actants'.	Calls for further ANT-based research on AFNs
27	Marin and Russo (2016)	Anti-mafia local supply chains	To problematise the extent to which food security is able to re-localise 'legal' food in the market	Case study	Italy	Empowerment and citizenship	AFNs can act as pivot in order to ensure food security	

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No.	Authors	Type of AFN	Objective	Methodology	Country	Theory	Findings	Limitations/further research
28	Paddock (2016)	Farmers market and food co-op	To consider the role of class culture in the practice of alternative food consumption.	Interviews, observation, survey, documentary analysis	Wales	Sociology of consumption	Working-class consumers may feel excluded culturally	
29	Pasucci et al. (2016)	Solidarity-based purchasing group	Investigate values and transaction conditions in consumer participation in AFNs	Interviews with participants and non-participants	Italy	Portrait Value Questionnaire	Participation in alternative food networks is influenced by both values of individual participants and transactional conditions.	Calls for a longitudinal study, analysing how changes in social interactions affect transactional cost-related issues, and hence participation.
30	Thorsøe and Kjeldsen (2016)	Food communities	Explore the function, configuration and generation of trust in AFNs	Interviews	Denmark	Sociology of trust	Trust creates coherency and facilitates co-operation between food communities and producers	Revise theory related to understanding the generation of trust in AFNs
31	Cherrier (2017)	Food distribution to the homeless	Examine negotiated, contested and nonlinear formation of highly marginalised and stigmatised alternative food market	Ethnographic case study	Undisclosed	Assemblage theory	AFNs may involve socially marginalised and materially deprived consumers, acting as both producer and consumer through unusual food provision techniques and localised networks	Consider the factors within AFNs that encourage a sensibility that can result in sociocultural change.
32	de Hoop and Jehlička (2017)	Food self-provisioning (FSP)	Discuss how activists engage with food self-provisioning through discourse and in practice	Ethnographic fieldwork and interviews	Czechia	Actor-Network Theory	Czech ENGOs do not engage much with FSP even though FSP may have appealing environmentally friendly characteristics	

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No.	Authors	Type of AFN	Objective	Methodology	Country	Theory	Findings	Limitations/further research
33	Hopkinson (2017)	Alternative veal markets	Trace the making and shaping of two market versions for male dairy calves	Analysis of media articles	UK	Actor-Network Theory	The mainstream and alternative are symbiotic beyond the flow of ideas and practices.	How do the different relationship possibilities between consumers and either retailers or more distant organisations affect agency? Further research that builds on marketing themes of celebrity, branding and knowledge of retail should also be deployed to develop a fuller understanding of mainstream-alternative relationality.
34	Kopczyńska (2017)	Open air food markets and consumer food co-op	Research SFSCs from the perspective of social relations.	Interviews	Poland	Embeddedness	The forms and dynamics of food markets' and co-operatives' economic orders are intertwined with individual biographies, family structures, class relations, or changes in consumption patterns	The extent to which new food system models can be anchored in traditional Eastern European agroeconomies, or whether they need complete reinvention and reproduction of Western patterns
35	Opitz et al. (2017)	CSA, self-harvest gardens, food co-ops	to develop an analytical framework for consumer producer interactions and apply it to investigate consumers' learning about and appreciation of agriculture	Interviews	Germany	Consumer-producer interactions	During AFN participation, consumers learn about food (seasonality, cooking/nutrition, housekeeping aspects) and agricultural production (farmers' perspectives, cultivation).	

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No.	Authors	Type of AFN	Objective	Methodology	Country	Theory	Findings	Limitations/further research
36	Papaoikonomou and Ginielis (2017)	CSA and responsible consumption communities	Are local food systems transformative?	Case studies with interviews, document analysis)	USA and Spain		LFs are constructed and governed to serve different purposes depending on the context they are found Consumers are active partners in AFNs strongly affecting the process of knowledge development and diffusion. The interaction between consumers and producers can be a primary source of innovation.	
37	Randelli and Rocchi (2017)	AFNs generally	Shine a light on the role of consumers in an innovation system	Conceptual	n/a	Technological Innovation System	Strong shared commitments between actors. AFNs provide opportunities for minimising economic domination and exploitation and alleviating the subordinated position of local subjects.	The case study cannot be considered entirely representative of the way consumers influence the innovation process
38	Watson and Ekici (2017)	Food box scheme	Explore how different actors come to share the commitment to minimise economic domination	Interviews, observations, and document analysis	Türkiye	Shared commitments	Consumers' attitude towards AFNs directly influences the perceived quality of food products; and these two elements are determinants of overall satisfaction with participation in AFNs.	Explore more deeply the ill-being outcomes that may come from shared commitments within an alternative economy.
40	Carzedda et al. (2018)	CSA, farmers' markets, solidarity purchasing group	Explore how personal attitude and product quality perception influence relative satisfaction over participation in AFNs	Survey and structural equation modelling	Italy			Calls for studying non-AFN consumers

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No.	Authors	Type of AFN	Objective	Methodology	Country	Theory	Findings	Limitations/further research
41	Giordano et al. (2018)	Community-supported agriculture	Examine 'neo-rural' communitarian networks located in Southern Italy	Participant observation, interviews	Italy	Coming communities	AFNs harbour the potential of a new politics of things that blurs established boundaries between production, consumption and civic action, and that sees markets and marketing as arenas in which to pursue such civic goals	
42	Hashem et al. (2018)	Organic box schemes	Understand the motives of customers of box schemes and examine the relationship with their awareness about problems of the agro-food system	Interviews and survey of box scheme users	UK (England)	Ethical consumerism	Consumers of small local organic box schemes are both altruistically and hedonistically motivated. This includes a strong political motivation to change the current food system. They perceive local organic food as a more environmentally sustainable alternative to the mainstream food system. The box schemes offer consumers a practical alternative by providing high-quality products combined with convenience illustrating the importance of the latter also in local food shopping. This reinforces the possibility to successfully combining the attributes of 'local' and 'organic'.	Call for research on non-participants

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No.	Authors	Type of AFN	Objective	Methodology	Country	Theory	Findings	Limitations/further research
43	Sacchi (2018)	Solidarity purchasing group	Analyse the extent of political drivers of ethical consumption within AFNs and analyse the values behind participation	Focus groups (ethical consumers and solidarity purchasing group representatives)	Italy	Political consumerism	Behaviours of ethical consumers towards ethical products appears mainly affected by social and environmental concerns such as workers' rights and carbon emission reduction. Organic certification and values-based labelling system do not represent a driver motivation for consumers' purchasing.	Explore what communication strategies should be taken in order to promote a more ethical and aware purchasing choice
44	Watts et al. (2018)	Multiple	Understand the ways in which human agents construe and participate in AFN in the context of their construal of and (non)participation in conventional food networks.	Interviews and food diaries of AFN users	UK	Cultural political economy	Respondents construed, both semiotically and materially, distinct imaginaries of conventional and alternative food networks. Their normative evaluations favour AFN.	Calls for further AFN research applying a cultural political economy perspective

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No.	Authors	Type of AFN	Objective	Methodology	Country	Theory	Findings	Limitations/further research
45	Zoll et al. (2018)	CSA, self-harvest gardens, food co-ops	Aims to identify the rationale and motivation of urban residents in participating in AFNs and developing a consumer typology	Interviews with members of existing AFN projects	Germany	Consumer segmentation	Participation driven by personal desire for high-quality food (in terms of taste or freshness) and health reasons, but also political or environmental motives (opposition to conventional agriculture or short transport distances). Furthermore, consumers often want to support a certain farmer and their philosophy or they appreciate the community-building aspect. Many consumers communicated a sense of belonging to a societal movement, however, there is a lack of organisation and collective action.	Further research on the distinct mixes of motivations and different motivation priorities
46	De Bernardi et al. (2019)	Food assembly	Test the impact of online and on-site knowledge sharing on customers' self-reported sustainable behaviour changes.	Survey of food assembly customers, interviews, focus groups	Italy	Social capital and knowledge sharing	Online knowledge sharing significantly affects customer change towards more sustainable purchasing and consumption behaviours, while on-site knowledge sharing positively affects sustainable purchasing behaviours.	Calls for studies in other contexts, over time, and analysing knowledge sharing enhanced by blockchain within food systems

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No.	Authors	Type of AFN	Objective	Methodology	Country	Theory	Findings	Limitations/further research
47	Diekmann and Theuvsen (2019)	CSA	Identify factors promoting, hindering or influencing the interest of consumers, who are not yet participating, in CSA	Survey	Germany	Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT 2)	Consumers' hedonic motivation, personal habits and interests in agriculture as well as their social peer group have a positive influence on consumers' interest in CSA. Expected effort related to CSA is an important barrier	Calls to specify individual characteristics that predetermine persons for a membership and longitudinal studies monitoring consumers' perception of CSA before, during and after completing a membership. Research consumers' lack of conviction from universal and altruistic benefits of the scheme.
48	Escobar-López et al. (2019)	Organic markets	Identify the motivations to consume ecological foods in AFNs	Survey of shoppers at organic markets	Spain	Food choice questionnaire	Ten factors or motivations were found: social ecological concern, nutritional content, sensory aspects, certifications, naturalness, specialised consumption, trust in the seller, economic aspects, health, and availability. Four clusters identified: citizen consumers, in-process citizen consumers, conscious social consumers with no interest in certifications, and conscious pragmatic consumers.	Calls for better understanding of motivations

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No.	Authors	Type of AFN	Objective	Methodology	Country	Theory	Findings	Limitations/further research
49	Gollnhofer et al. (2019)	Dumpster diving and food sharing	Refine theorisation on value regimes, illuminating a new type of consumer movement strategy where consumers collaborate to construct alternative object pathways	Participant observation, interviews, documentary analysis	Germany	Consumer movements	Identify three conditions that make consumer interventions into object pathways more likely: 1) physical access to object pathways, 2) a systemic challenge, and 3) mastery of digital media.	Investigations into other sociocultural contexts may identify alternative trajectories in value regime evolution. Investigate the boundaries between consumer entrepreneurship, consumer activism, and consumer collaboration.
50	Migliore et al. (2019)	Community gardens	Understand the main motivations that influence citizens' participation and to measure the effects of these motivations on fruit and vegetable consumption among participants	Survey of community garden participants	Italy		Saving money on food expenditure is not a motivation that drives participation. Most important motivation participants identified was eating safe food. Building a different model of society is another important motivation of citizens' participation, highlighting the political nature of these networks	Comparative research needed to more deeply understand citizen concerns about food safety and the political motivations that underpin the choice to participate

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No.	Authors	Type of AFN	Objective	Methodology	Country	Theory	Findings	Limitations/further research
51	Opitz et al. (2019)	CSA	Investigate which consumer-producer interactions (CPIs) are most relevant for economic stability of a farm	CSA expert survey	Germany, Switzerland, and Austria	Analytic Hierarchy Process	The key influential CPIs are 'financing', 'land' and 'produce'. 'land' and 'financing' reflect the most important needs of a farmer. Hence, these CPIs could be seen as ways in which consumers empower the producer economically. In addition, one of the most important motivations for consumers participating in a CSA is the access to a certain quality of food. Consumers and producers build a reciprocal relationship to stabilise the economy of a CSA farm.	Whether farmers are willing to share ownership rights, or if they prefer to keep autonomy over the land, and how property rights can be shared when contracts with consumers are limited

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No.	Authors	Type of AFN	Objective	Methodology	Country	Theory	Findings	Limitations/further research
52	Pilar' et al. (2019)	Farmers Markets	Identify segments of farmers' market customers in relation to the amount of money they spend at a farmers' market	Survey, Structure equation modelling	Czechia	Customer segmentation	Four consumer segments at farmers' markets: (1) product-oriented customers; (2) personal social responsibility-oriented customers; (3) entertainment and emotional-oriented customers; (4) alternative food-oriented customers. Most money was spent at farmers' markets by entertainment and emotional-oriented and product-oriented customers. Farmers' markets are no longer just a place to purchase fresh, high-quality food, but also a place that people visit for its atmosphere, for the food that can be eaten on-site, and to buy products not for direct consumption (e.g. flowers).	Conduct an extensive multi-country analysis with the aim of identifying regional urban-rural differences to better understand regional and cultural differences in customer behaviour at farmers' markets.

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No.	Authors	Type of AFN	Objective	Methodology	Country	Theory	Findings	Limitations/further research
53	Vittersø et al. (2019)	Various farmers' markets, solidarity purchasing group, box scheme, co-ops	What aspects and dimensions of sustainability are important to SFSC participants and how do these perceptions vary between diverse types of participants and types of SFSCs?	Case studies	France, Hungary, Italy, Norway, Poland and the UK	Dimensions of sustainability	Strong agreement among the participants regarding the contribution of SFSCs to social sustainability. However, participants' views considerably differ regarding the economic and environmental dimensions of sustainability	Perform further statistical analyses to investigate potential differences in consumer perceptions of SFSCs geographically and across, categories of cases and products
54	Birtalan et al. (2020)	Community Supported Agriculture (CSA)	Reveal how the spouse of the primary food shopper influences CSA membership.	Interviews with CSA members and spouses	Hungary	Household decision making	Details how a spouse has an impact on purchase decision making – particularly in CSA – and how new domains and forms of co-operation or conflicts may develop in a couple regarding food issues.	Further research on the social environment, including interactions with family, friends or others in the CSA group
55	Cicatiello (2020)	Various (farm shop, farmers' market, solidarity purchasing group, box scheme)	Identify the factors explaining the quantity of food that customers choose to buy at alternative markets	Interviews with food shoppers at alternative markets	Italy	Sustainability	Customers' loyalty to the market emerges as a very important factor in shaping the quantity of food purchased at AFNs	Calls for more research on customers of conventional distribution channels

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No.	Authors	Type of AFN	Objective	Methodology	Country	Theory	Findings	Limitations/further research
56	Dhaoui et al. (2020)	Direct from the producer, e-commerce, Fair Trade	Gain better insight into Cretan consumers' behaviour towards alternative distribution channels (ADCs) of fresh fruits and vegetables.	Survey and focus groups	Greece	Customer values	Consumers' behaviour towards ADCs is affected by socio-economic factors (age, level of education, monthly family income) and personal factors (environmental concerns, pro-social concerns and perceived availability).	Identify the factors that may moderate the impact of environmental concerns and pro-social norms
57	Fourat et al. (2020)	Consumer food co-operative	Explore the challenge faced by a consumer food co-operative to combine social inclusion and embeddedness in its urban environment with the standards of food quality it targets	Participatory action research	Belgium	Sustainability	Alternative food networks struggle to combine social inclusion and sustainability dimensions. Sociocultural equality in access to quality food is hindered by differences between members and non-members of the co-op. Food, consumer, and participation cultures differ between members and non-members.	Further research on how AFNs address the tensions between economic, environmental and social aspects of sustainability, especially regarding social inclusion

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No.	Authors	Type of AFN	Objective	Methodology	Country	Theory	Findings	Limitations/further research
58	Kessari et al. (2020)	Collective farmers' shops	Study the conditions under which these organisations maintain sustainable performance by achieving both social and economic goals	Interviews with shops	France	Sustainability performance	AFN performance depends on co-operation through competition, mutual help and collective governance, clear communication, and focusing the mission on territorial embeddedness and political change.	Limited financial data and access to all actors and need for further study of the environmental dimension of sustainability
59	Michel (2020)	Local food project	Apply institutional analysis in order to comprehend actors' efforts to scale up alternatives and transform the food system at the local level.	Longitudinal case study	France	Institutional analysis	AFNs need to be connected to become powerful but this creates internal and external tensions. Identifies common ground efforts as a key condition to achieve institutional change from multiple actors	Expand the emerging model of collaborative institutional work by another empirical investigation on a local coalition that breaks with the global food system. Organizational studies could also explore other types of challenges to capitalist regimes.
60	Neulinger et al. (2020)	CSA	Understand the relationship of users to AFNs using subjective wellbeing (SWB)	Interviews with members of existing AFN projects	Hungary	Subjective and consumer wellbeing	Membership in AFNs can increase SWB, while certain characteristics of these networks can also decrease it	Sample only considers users who are middle/upper middle class

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No.	Authors	Type of AFN	Objective	Methodology	Country	Theory	Findings	Limitations/further research
61	Sovová and Veen (2020)	Allotment gardening	Study the meanings of food self-provisioning for allotment gardeners and the material manifestations of this practice.	Interviews and food logs	Czechia and the Netherlands	Social practice theory	Gardening is mostly motivated by noneconomic values. Creating a more sustainable food system is not a main reason to garden.	More research on traditional food practices such as allotment gardening
62	Zwart and Mathijs (2020)	Food teams	Study the diverse practices that shape an AFN, how they influence and interact with each other, and how they are influenced by the contexts in which they operate	Interviews and desktop study	Belgium	Social practice theory	Sustainability-related objectives may drive the emergence of new social practices. Emergent practices may be less aligned with and difficult to fit into daily lives. AFN membership thus requires more effort and motivation from the participants.	Calls for research on how sustainable options could be made widely available and easily accessible to all.
63	Foti and Timpanaro (2021)	Farmers Markets	Demonstrate that farmers' markets can represent a model of environmental, social and governance reference for modern agri-food systems	Survey of shoppers at farmers' markets	Italy		Efficient and durable relationship systems depend on consumer sensitivity to sustainability processes, the individual behavioural model of purchasing and consumption, the expectation of political direction and the level and factors of knowledge of the firm.	How digital transformation can combine with sustainability to find new answers to consumer expectations.

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No.	Authors	Type of AFN	Objective	Methodology	Country	Theory	Findings	Limitations/further research
64	Klimek et al. (2021)	Farmers Markets	Investigate the values and practices of farmers' markets and their linkages to wider alternative food practices of ecological, social and economic sustainability.	Case studies	Austria	Values-based framework	Consumers share values regarding product quality, support for farmers, ecological and social sustainability, and learning about the production and origin of their food. The majority of Viennese FM shoppers are women and regular customers who purchase weekly. Overwhelming interest from consumers for more farmer presence, specific information about products, and small farmer support.	Examining components of local urban food systems and their impacts on local and global sustainability
65	Pasucci et al. (2021)	CSA, Solidarity Purchasing Groups, Community Gardens and Consumer Groups	Explore the role of sociomateriality in authority-building processes of partial organisations	Case studies	Italy, Netherlands and Spain	Authority-building processes	Human agency enacted by participants in food provisioning arenas entangles with the sociomateriality of food in forging authority-building processes in partial organisations like AFNs	Extending focus on authority-building processes to further clarify whether other sociomaterial entanglements and patterns may explain their emergence and consolidation

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No.	Authors	Type of AFN	Objective	Methodology	Country	Theory	Findings	Limitations/further research
66	Stephens and Barbier (2021)	Local food distribution platform through hives	How useful is prosumption, as a concept, for the characterisation of the growingly diverse food provisioning practices that are carried out through AFNs?	Interviews, and data scrapping	France	Prosumption	Web 2.0 digital devices provide enhanced prosumer customisation and transparency. Prosumers are concerned with their diets, food quality, transparency, and flexibility.	Study new intermediations which the promises of improved food transparency seem to justify.
67	Veen et al. (2021)	Allotments, community gardens, windowsill, backyard, wild foraging	Explores the concept of prosumption in the world of food.	Survey and interviews with those who engage in prosumption	Netherlands	Prosumption	Respondents experience prosumption as a pleasurable and satisfying activity that gives access to tasty, healthy, fresh, cheap and specifically home-made produce.	Embrace a pragmatic approach to prosumption, paying attention to on-the-ground prosumption activities.
68	Zoll et al. (2021)	CSA, food co-operatives and self-harvest gardens	Do drivers of transformation occur in the three AFN models food co-op, CSA and self-harvest garden? How do consumers and producers describe and perceive these drivers of transformation?	Interviews with producers and consumers	Germany	Social innovation	Identifies five drivers of transformation, which occurred in different forms and were of different relevance	Calls for a large-scale study and transnational comparisons. Given the drivers of transformation framework are self-reported, future research should verify their occurrence empirically to avoid attitude-behaviour gaps in the data.

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No.	Authors	Type of AFN	Objective	Methodology	Country	Theory	Findings	Limitations/further research
69	Furness et al. (2022)	CSA	Analyse CSA communication methods, examining the interactions between CSAs and their members	Interviews with CSA members	UK	Social capital	CSAs where members can interact easily, there are social and informational benefits, developed through both bonding and bridging capital.	Explore how different types of social capital created by CSAs can translate into wider food system transformation. Understand if diversification of CSA membership can promote linking capital and build a more representative food movement.
70	Misleh (2022)	AFNs generally	Demonstrate the benefits of a deeper engagement with Polanyian geographies	Conceptual	n/a	Polanyi	A deeper engagement with Polanyian geographies enables a more nuanced approach to evaluating alternatives and their socio-political significance.	Analyse the concrete practices of the alternative and the hegemonic: the meaning-making practices, discursive strategies, governance mechanisms, economic practices, and political and ideological work in a relational manner.
71	Möllers et al. (2022)	Traditional production supply chains	Understand the preferences of consumers when choosing and buying fresh vegetables	Discrete choice experiment through survey	Romania	Ethical consumerism	The main barrier to making an ethically driven choice is convenience. While local production remains of lower importance than the production method, consumers strongly prefer non-certified 'traditional' vegetables over certified organic products.	Conduct a broader investigation into the meaning of traditional agriculture and how it is interwoven with the concept of origin and other important food values

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No.	Authors	Type of AFN	Objective	Methodology	Country	Theory	Findings	Limitations/further research
72	Nikolaïdou et al. (2023)	Participatory Guarantee Systems (PGS)	How to strengthen consumers' knowledge regarding local food and its territorial anchoring, associating product quality with territorial attributes while facilitating consumer participation in the guarantee process	Survey	Greece	Social learning	Consumers, producers, and researchers are seen as co-operating communities that can potentially enable social learning processes through a PGS	Establish the viability of the assessment of both the farmer's reliability and consumer education process.
73	Teufer, Waiguny, and Grabner-Kräuter (2023)	Food co-operative	Examine how different sustainability labels influence consumer perceptions and assessments of alternative food networks (AFNs).	Online experiments	Austria	Sustainable consumption and labelling	Both self-designed and professionally designed sustainability labels had a positive effect on the intention to buy from an AFN. Professionally designed labels also enhanced the perceived authenticity of the networks. Notably, the source of the label, whether self-awarded or awarded by an official body, did not significantly impact consumer perceptions. However, interaction effects revealed professionally designed labels had a stronger positive effect on purchase intention when they were self-awarded.	The levels of trust placed in the awarding institutions and whether this affects the perception of the labels

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No.	Authors	Type of AFN	Objective	Methodology	Country	Theory	Findings	Limitations/further research
74	Ušča and Aleksejeva (2023)	Direct purchasing network	Whether local food chain farmers are committed to environmental sustainability	Interviews and observations with farmers and consumers from network	Latvia	Food systems	Bio and product diversity, fewer chemicals in the environment (organic agriculture), seasonality and locality of diets, as well as food miles regarded as critical by the SFSC actors. Key difference: farmers depicted their views more on a local scale, while consumers – on a national and global scale.	Due to typical consumer engagement in the network (volunteering) only a particular section of society could be interested in participating in the network, affecting views of environmental sustainability.
75	Viciunaite (2023)	Digital farmers' market (grassroots online purchasing network)	Understand consumer preferences for digital AFN attributes in the context of REKO – a digital farmer's market in Norway.	Survey with choice experiment with REKO customers	Norway		Traditional AFN attributes are more important than digital platform attributes. Hedonic and utilitarian customer segments with differing preferences for digital AFNs.	Calls for research using a netnographic approach to understand digital AFNs' reconnection potential, as well as the dark sides of platform AFNs
76	O'Neill (2024)	AFNs collectively	Explore the imaginary idylls of AFN businesses and policymakers, to expose how they fold these ideas into their actions, perceptions, and practices.	Interviews with businesses and policymakers	Italy and UK		Ideals like the rural idyll employ essentialised perspectives based on traditional peasant agriculture, which work to obfuscate and even vilify industrial agriculture, and that such binary thinking is unhelpful in reconceptualising food system transformation.	Explore food systems in a wider range of regions, including peripheral locations, or areas associated with industrial forms of food production.

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No.	Authors	Type of AFN	Objective	Methodology	Country	Theory	Findings	Limitations/further research
77	Zoll et al. (2024)	Community gardens, the app Too Good To Go (TGTG), and a co-operative supermarket.	Provide insights into transformative potential of AFNs by exploring participants' underlying motivations, the changes experienced, and the challenges and potential for future development	Interviews	Germany	Social innovation	Participation in community gardens and co-operative supermarket motivated by social aspects and dissatisfaction with existing food access options, while TGTG users are more financially motivated. Change is experienced mainly at the individual level, e.g. by building new relationships, changing cognitive framings, and learning (new) practices, especially in community-oriented settings. The individualisation of change shows that these models have a rather low potential to lead to more systemic accounts of changes. Yet, they can prefigure regime change, describe resistance, and foster cumulative incremental change that may spill over.	Explore accessibility to marginalised groups and unveil how many people are interested in joining such models, what the current barriers to joining are, and how more people could be motivated to join beyond the more sustainability-oriented group we interviewed.

Appendix 2

Table A1. Number of studies addressing marketing aspects of alternative food networks (AFNs), published from 2010 to 2024.

Year	Number of studies
2010	2
2011	2
2012	1
2013	7
2014	4
2015	7
2016	8
2017	8
2018	6
2019	8
2020	9
2021	6
2022	3
2023	4
2024*	2

*Incomplete data as Systematic Literature Review conducted on the 8 May 2024.

Table A2. Types of AFNs considered in the final set of systematic literature review (SLR) papers.

Type of AFN	Number of studies in SLR*
Farmers' markets	15
Solidarity based purchasing groups	14
Self-provision, allotments and community gardens	10
Community supported agriculture	14
Food co-operatives	9
Food markets	2
Food/Fish box scheme	5
Anti-mafia supply chains	1
Food distribution to homeless/dumpster diving/consumer redistribution	4
Food assembly/food teams	3
Direct sales/farm shops	5

*Some studies considered more than one type of AFN.

Table A3. Country coverage in the final set of systematic literature review (SLR) papers.

Country	Number of studies in SLR*
Italy	20
UK	10
Czechia	6
Germany	6
Hungary	5
France	5
Netherlands	4
Austria	4
Belgium	3
Poland	3
Spain	3
Denmark	2
Norway	2
Greece	2
Türkiye	1
Switzerland	1
Romania	1
Latvia	1

*Some studies include empirical research from more than one country.

Table A4. Publication outlet of the final set of systematic literature review (SLR) papers.

Journal title	Number of papers
Journal of Rural Studies	14
Sociologia Ruralis	7
British Food Journal	5
Agriculture and Human Values	5
Sustainability	5
Journal of Marketing Management	5
International Journal of Consumer Studies	4
Local Environment	3
Agricultural Economics	2
Journal of Consumer Research	1
Journal of Macromarketing	1
Marketing Theory	1
Organization	1
Organizational Studies	1
Sociology	1

Table A5. Methods employed in the final set of systematic literature review (SLR) papers.

Methods	Number of papers using a particular method*
Interviews	34
Consumer/member survey	22
Case studies	11
Observation/ethnography	10
Document/archive analysis	8
Focus groups	4
Media analysis/data scrapping	2
Food diaries/logs	2
Panel survey data analysis	1
Participatory action research	1
Experiments	1

*Some studies employed more than research method.

Table A6. Theories employed in the final set of systematic literature review (SLR) papers.

Theory	Number of papers drawing on a particular theory*
Practice theory/social practice theory	6
Ethical/political consumption	5
Sustainability	5
Values and lifestyles	4
Community theory	4
Customer/consumer segmentation	3
Actor-network theory	3
Networks/network analysis	2
Cultural political economy	2
Social capital	2
Prosumption	2
Social innovation	2
Theory of Reasoned Action/Planned Behaviour	1
Transitional management theory	1
Territorial models	1
Food regime theory	1
SERVQUAL	1
Utility theory	1
Assemblage theory	1
Embeddedness	1
Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT2)	1
Food choice questionnaire	1
Institutional analysis	1
Social learning	1
Food systems	1

*Some studies drew on more than one theory or had no clear theoretical underpinning.