Background

The Alternative Food Movement in the United States seeks to establish and grow localized alternative food networks. As this social movement gained widespread popularity over the last two decades, AFM institutions (e.g. farmers markets, community-supported agriculture, and food cooperatives) have been elevated as sites for ethical consumerism, where shoppers can 'cast a vote with their fork' for a more sustainable future (Jarosz, 2008; Johnston, 2016). However, several authors argue that ethical consumerism fails to challenge the dominant power structures of the industrial food system that the AFM seeks to resist (Busa & Garder, 2014; Guthman, 2008a; Maniates, 2001).

Previous critiques of the AFM suggest that it may reproduce the same structural issues it seeks to address by (i) incorrectly equating food production at the local scale with desirable social and environmental outcomes (see Born & Purcell, 2006; Busa & Garder, 2015; Feagan, 2007; Harris, 2010; Johnston, 2016), (ii) reproducing existing inequitable food access dynamics (see Guthman, 2003, 2008a, 2008b; Slocum, 2007), and (iii) individualizing and moralizing efforts towards food systems change (see Busa & Garder, 2015; Busa & King, 2015; Dupuis, Harrison, and Goodman, 2011; Johnston, 2008). Although all are interconnected, the third critique is the focus of my inquiry. Food system scholars and activists argue that while ethical consumerism's outcomes are not wholly undesirable, the practice may encourage the incorrect perception that food systems reform can be achieved through alternative food consumption alone—individualizing what ought to be a collective challenge to an inequitable and unsustainable industrial food system (Busa & Garder, 2015; Busa & King, 2015; Dupuis, Harrison, and Goodman, 2011; Johnston, 2008; Johnston, 2016). Furthermore, the logic of AFM ethical consumerism is predicated on participants accepting a moral obligation to pay a higher cost for more ecologically and socially responsible food (Bradley & Herrera, 2015; Guthman, 2008a). Through this moralization, consumers of cheap food are implicitly cast as victims (lacking agency and knowledge) and/or villains (immoral) while alternative food consumers are cast as heroes, and the assumption that there is one 'right' way to eat—which all consumers should choose given the knowledge and means—is reinforced (Busa & Garder, 2015; Guthman, 2008a).

Purpose

The critiques outlined above are well grounded in theory, but further empirical work on AFM ethical consumerism and its outcomes is needed to explore potential solutions. Accordingly, my research topic is designed to help fill this gap between theory and empirical research. Specifically, I seek to document how respondents connect their food consumption choices to notions of political engagement (i.e. is the logic of ethical consumerism applied), and how they perceive others that do not make the same choices (i.e. are nonparticipants cast as unethical). I will use my findings to create recommendations for community food system stakeholders (e.g. Whatcom Food Network) designed to facilitate participation in the movement beyond acts of consumption.

Methods

As mentioned previously, there are relatively few empirical studies engaging with ethical consumerism in the AFM, thus there is limited precedent to directly inform my choice of methods for this thesis. In one previous study on the topic, Busa & Garder (2015) use a cross-sectional survey and semi-structured interviews to conduct a case study on the perceptions of AFM participants in Holyoke, MA. Given the similarity of the authors' scope and research questions to my own inquiry, I considered replicating their mixed-methods approach in this thesis. However, the validity of Busa & Garder's findings depends on their use of a stratified random sample to gather participants, and it is not feasible for me to do the same due to constraints on my time and financial resources. Additionally, a lineage of scholars beginning with Stephenson (1953) argues that survey techniques are unsuited to characterize the subjective, as they intrinsically impose the researcher's framework onto the participant (Stephenson, 1953; Robbins & Krueger, 2000). For these reasons, I will use Stephenson's alternative quantitative methodology—Q-method—to answer my research questions.

Q-method is a systematic research approach that combines aspects of qualitative and quantitative research methods to produce knowledge about the subjective perspectives and experiences of participants around a given topic (Brown, 1980). Although it was initially developed for the field of behavioral

psychology in 1953, it has since been operationalized in a variety of social science disciplines including human geography, political science, and political ecology (Stephenson, 1953; Dryzek & Berejikian, 1993; Robbins & Krueger, 2000). Q-method is distinct from R-methods (such as surveys) in a few capacities. First, while R-methods typically rely on a large, broadly representative sample to generate statistically significant results, Q-method draws from a smaller, targeted group of participants. Second, whereas R-method is used to characterize participant perspectives in the language of the researcher (e.g. the researcher writes a survey question), Q-method is designed explicitly to characterize participant perspectives in the language of *participants*. Finally, where R-methods characterize the patterns between individuals across subjective variables, Q-method is used to characterize the patterns between subjective variables across individuals (Dryzek & Berejikian, 1993; Robbins & Krueger, 2000). Thus, it provides a nuanced and statistically significant depiction of *some* of the perspectives that exist within a community and the relationships between them, but does not provide data on *all* perspectives nor the prevalence of these perspectives (Brown, 1980). Nonetheless, the relative certainty with which Q-method can be used to describe subjectivities makes it well-suited to my inquiry.

Research Design

A typical Q study involves five distinct phases: concourse development, Q-set development, data collection, analysis, and interpretation. Before discussing the practice of concourse development, it is useful to define the term. Methodologically, a concourse is analogous to the study population in R-methods. Thus, following Watts & Stenner (2012), it is "no more or less than the overall population of statements from which a final Q-set is sampled" (Watts & Stenner, 2012, p.34). Ideally, the concourse represents the full range of perspectives on the topic at hand, although there is no way to know for certain that this is the case. These perspectives, usually (although not always) in the form of statements, are gathered by the researcher from one of several sources including (but not limited to) interviews with study participants and texts relevant to the topic. For the purposes of this thesis, I have conducted semi-structured interviews with Bellingham Farmers Market and community-supported agriculture (CSA) participants to develop my concourse.

To gather farmers market participants, I sought permission from the Bellingham Farmers Market management to attend and purposively sample individuals whom I saw buying local food. To gather CSA participants, I used existing CSA email lists to distribute a document with a brief explanation of my research and a link to my screening survey. To incentivize participation, I offered participants two $10 gift cards to the Bellingham Farmers Market (one for the interview and one for the Q-sort). Drawing from both of these groups helps to ensure that I engage a more varied population of AFM participants, thus increasing the likelihood that my concourse represents the full range of perspectives within this group. I also asked prospective participants to complete a short screening and demographic survey both for use in subsequent analysis and to further inform my sampling decisions.

Having completed, transcribed, and coded all of my semi-structured interviews, I am presently developing my Q-set. To maintain rigor, I am ensuring that this set (or Q-set) has both *coverage* and *balance*. Coverage here refers to how "each individual item makes its own original contribution to the Q-set and that the items in their totality all sit neatly side by side without creating…gaps or redundant overlaps" (Watts & Stenner, 2012, p. 58). Meanwhile, balance requires that the set "does not appear to be value-laden or biased towards some particular viewpoint," but notably does not require that all statements taken together are equally positive and negative (Watts & Stenner, 2012, p.58, emphasis removed).

Once I have developed my Q-set, I will begin facilitating Q-sorts with my participants. In this phase, each statement in the Q-set is typically printed onto its own ~6 cm by 3 cm card. The researcher then asks participants to arrange the statements according to the extent to which they represent their own perspectives. Although some Q-method studies allow participants to arrange the cards freely, it is most common for statements to be sorted into a prearranged normal distribution grid (Watts & Stenner, 2012). After each participant completes their Q-sort, I will conduct and record a post-sorting interview in which I elicit the participant's rationale for their sorting decisions. Broadly speaking, the interview serves to

inform subsequent analysis by providing more detailed insight into each participant's Q-sort (Watts & Stenner, 2012). Although Q-sorts are typically conducted in-person, I will facilitate my Q-sorts remotely using Zoom and Q-Method Software due to the i) challenges associated with in-person scheduling and ii) my inability to find a suitable space for the Q-sort.

Once all participants have completed the Q-sort and post-sorting interview, I will use PQMethod to conduct factor analysis. Broadly speaking, factor analysis identifies patterns across all participants' Q-sorts, then produces several 'factors'—certain arrangements of statements (literally a constructed Q-sort) that represent a social perspective (Webler et al., 2009). Drawing on post-sorting interview transcripts, participant demographic information, social context, and previous literature, I will interpret each factor to create a narrative.

Expected Results

The narratives (or shared social perspectives) I develop from my Q-method analysis will give me insight into both my participants' motivations for buying alternative food and their perceptions of nonparticipants. Drawing on these narratives, I will draw conclusions about the validity of previous authors' critiques *as they apply to my participant group.* However, due to the subjective and often self-contradictory nature of my topic I cannot know what those conclusions will be until I begin factor analysis.

Schedule

Fall 2023:

Finish Q-set development

Conduct Q-sorts

Winter 2024:

Finish up Q-sorts (if necessary)

Conduct factor analysis

Interpret factors

Complete first thesis draft and receive feedback

Spring 2024:

Write final thesis draft

Defend thesis

Detailed Budget

Budget Item Description	Cost of Item	Quantity	Total Cost	Funded?
Bellingham Farmers Market gift card ("market bucks")	$10.00	70	$700.00	Yes, RSP Grant Winter 2023
Otter.AI Pro transcription services (1 month)	$20.00	6	$120	Yes, RSP Grant Winter 2023
Printing costs for survey flyers	$.05	300	$15.00	Yes, RSP Grant Winter 2023
Printing costs for one-pager to be distributed to community food system stakeholders	$.05	15	$0.75	Yes, RSP Grant Winter 2023
Q-Method Software "Student" Subscription (1 month) https://qmethodsoftware.com/	$99.00	4	$396.00	Pending, seeking funding from ENVS Small Grant (this application)
Total Budget			$835.75	

If my request is not approved, I will use a free online Q-method program (the free version is much less user friendly and may impact data quality, hence the need for the paid version)

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