Consumer Purchasing Behavior, Knowledge of, and Attitudes towards Locally-Grown Produce in the Mid-Atlantic Region

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Introduction

The Mid-Atlantic fruit and vegetable industry is greatly influenced by consumer needs and wants pertaining to the foods they purchase. Concerns about the health impacts of certain foods, supporting the local economy, environmental awareness, and food traceability and mileage (The Hartman Group, 2008) are among many factors that have shaped consumer demand for local food products.

To assist growers, processors, retailers, and other stakeholders with meeting consumer demand for specialty crops, including those locally-grown, Internet surveys were conducted to determine:

- local produce and food-product purchasing behavior,
- retail outlets from which local produce and food-products were purchased, and
- consumer opinions and knowledge of locally-grown produce.

Materials and Methods

Four separate 10-minute Internet surveys were administered in Nov. 2008, Apr. 2009, Oct.. 2009 and Mar. 2010 to an average of 1,592 Survey Sampling International, LLC (Shelton, CT) panelists residing in five metropolitan areas in the Mid-Atlantic Region (see map). Panelists were screened for being age 21 and older and the primary food shopper for the household. The study was approved by the Penn State Office of Research Protections (IRB No. 29446).

Figure 1: Percentage of participants who shop at farmers' markets, according to metropolitan area, and reported purchasing fruits and vegetables from this outlet

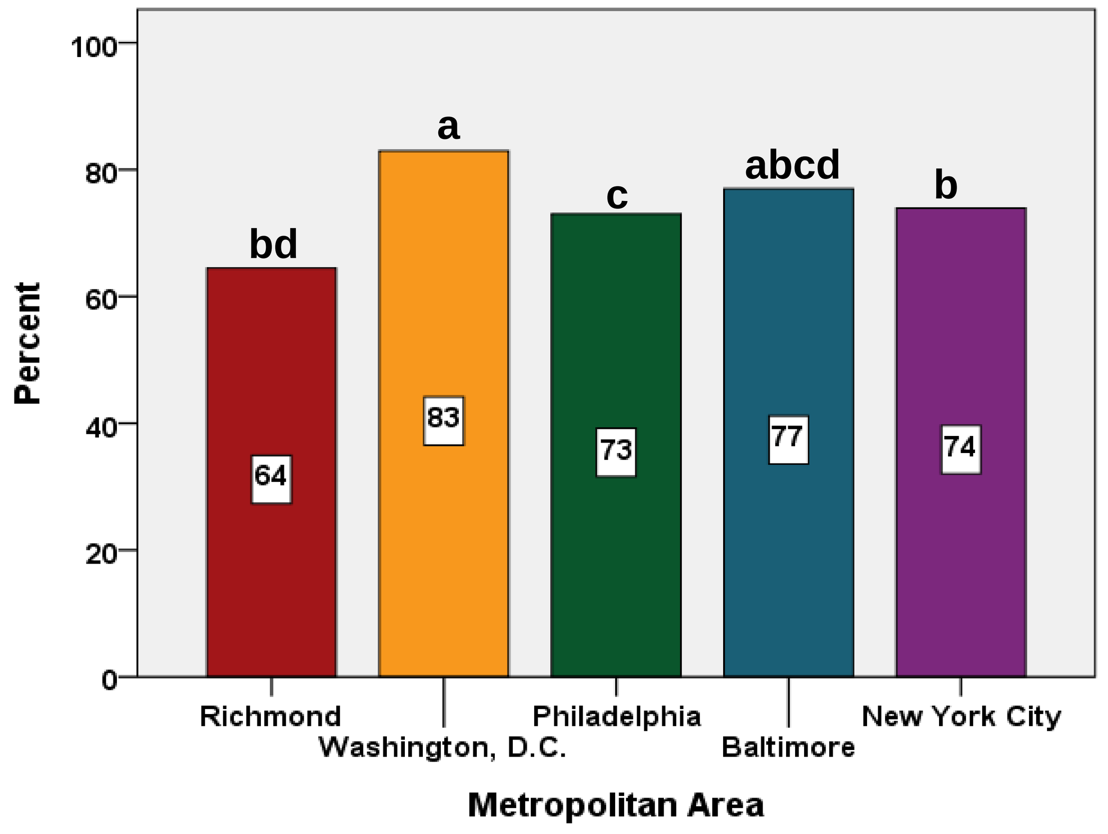


Figure 2: Participant selection of primary produce retailer when local produce is "in-season"

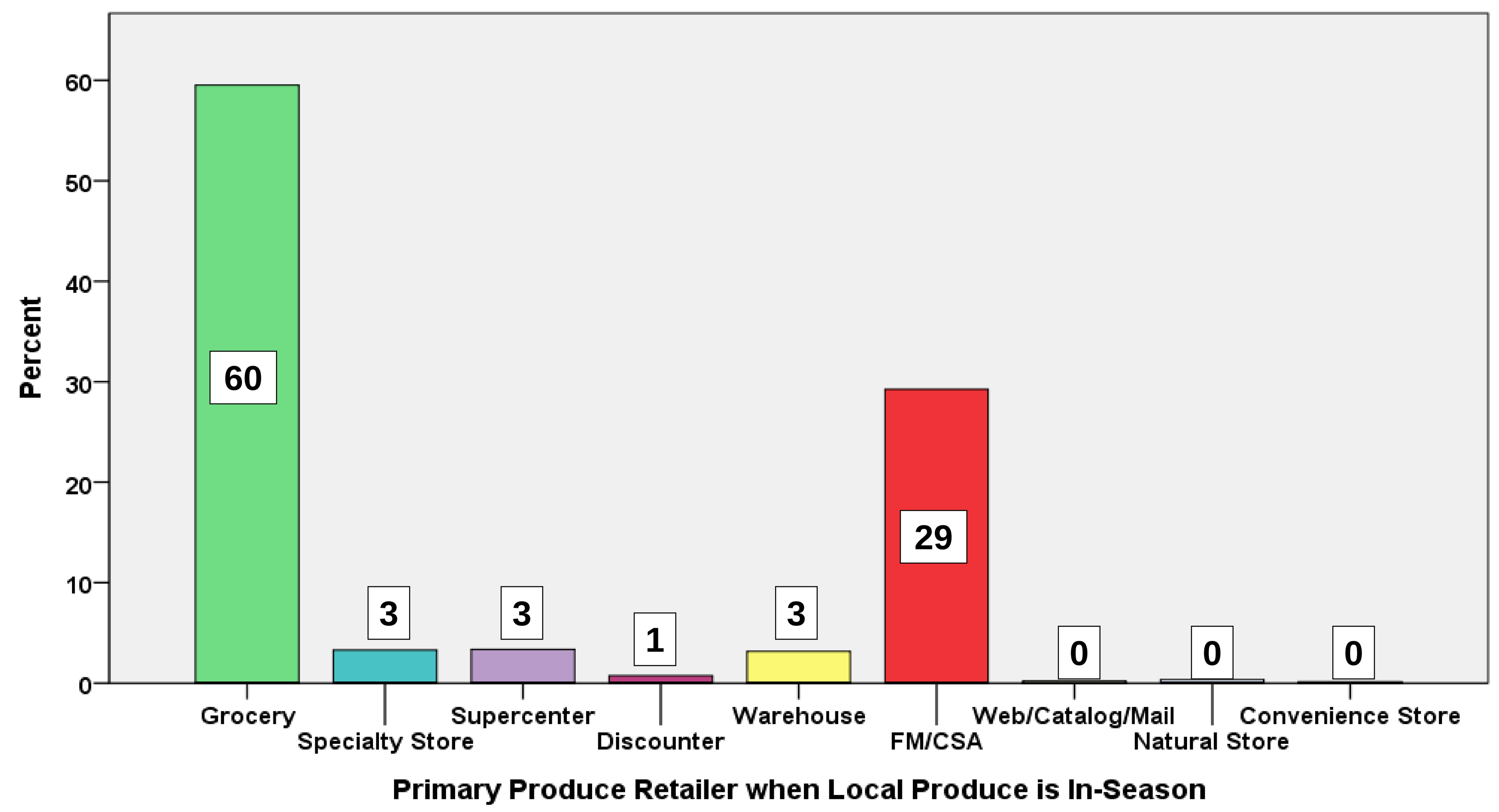


Figure 3: Participant definitions of "locally grown" according to number of miles from their residence

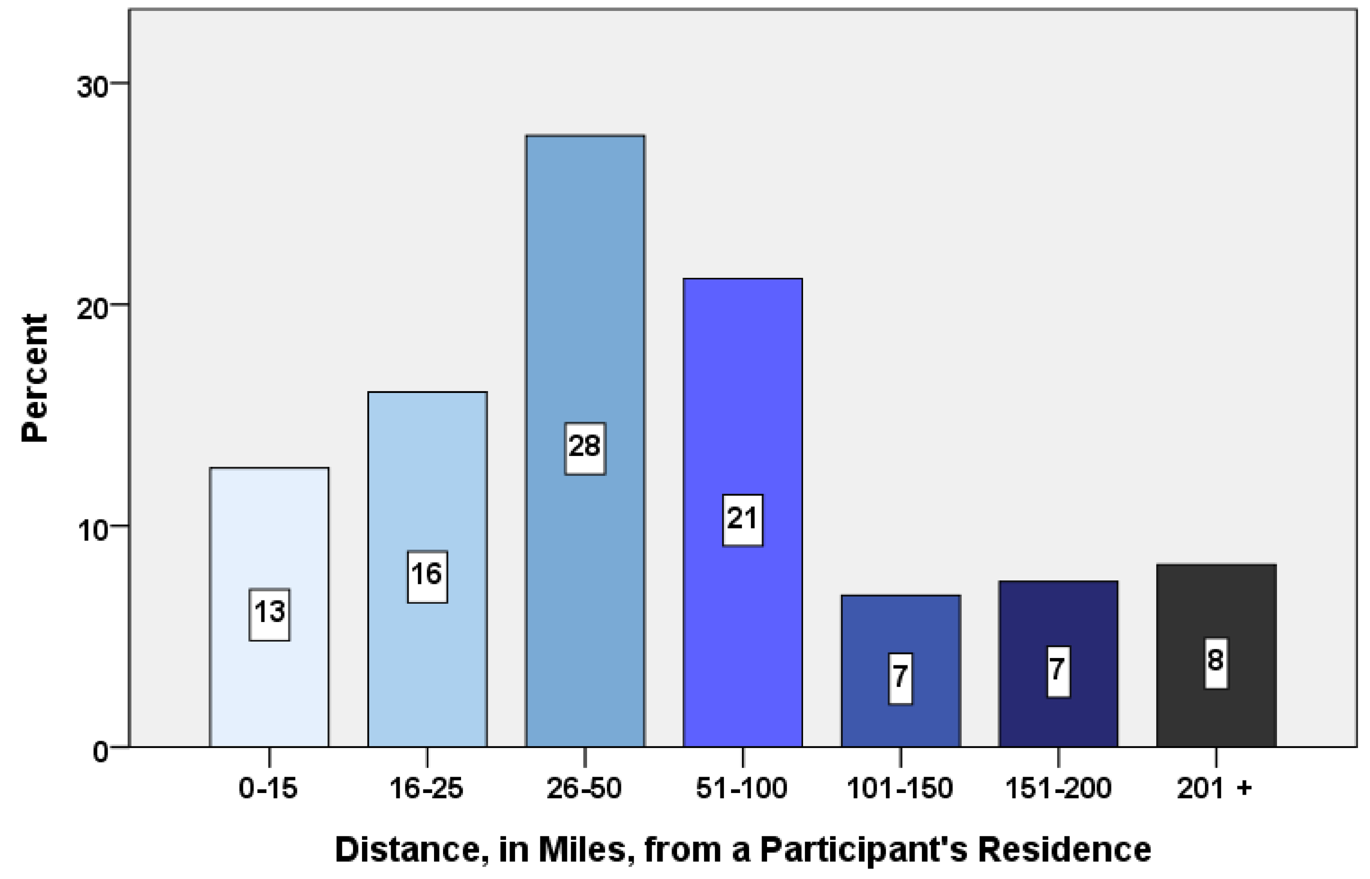
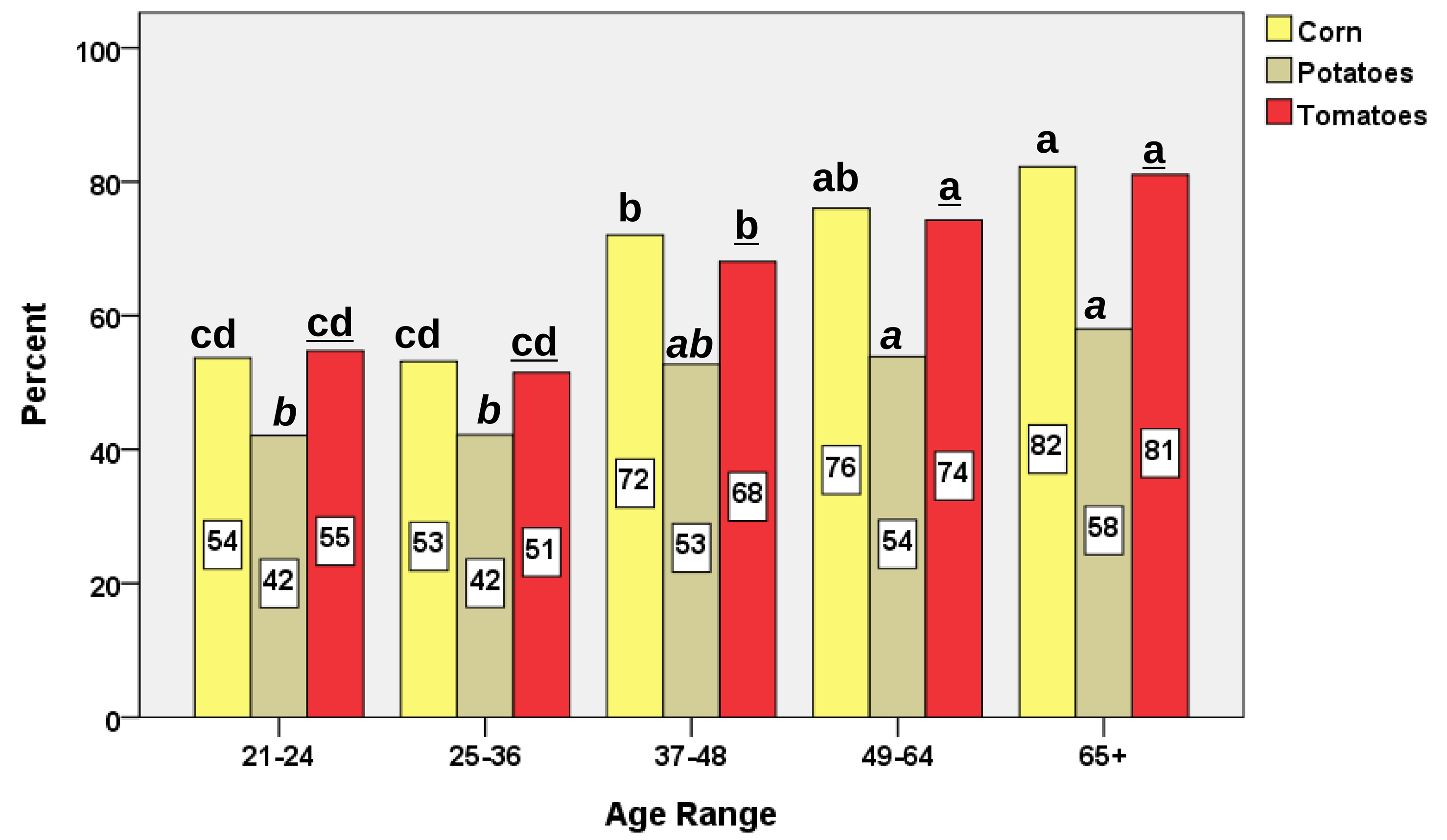


Figure 4: Percentage of participants, according to age group, reporting that corn, potatoes, and tomatoes are grown in the Mid-Atlantic region



Note: standard abcd labels pertain to significant results between age groups for "corn", while underlined abcd labels pertain to "tomatoes", and italicized abcd labels pertain to "potatoes"

Table 1: Average number and percent of participants based on metropolitan area of residence, across all four surveys

	Participants	
Metropolitan Area	Number	% total
New York City	643	40.5%
Philadelphia	372	23.2%
Baltimore	188	11.8%
Washington, D.C.	265	16.7%
Richmond	124	7.8%

Results

Common responses to demographic questions were: female (79.9%), Caucasian (82.9%), member of a two-adult household (53.1%), no children in the household (64%), under the age of 50 (51%), an associate level or technical degree or less (60.6%), and an income of $75,000 or lower (62.2%).

Purchasing Behavior/Retail Outlets from which Local Produce were Purchased

Pertaining to purchasing behavior, a significantly larger percentage of Washington D.C. participants reported purchasing fruits and vegetables from farmers' markets compared to Richmond, Philadelphia, and New York City participants (Figure 1). When compared to Philadelphia participants a significantly larger percentage of New York City participants reported purchasing these items from farmers' markets, and a significantly lower percentage of Richmond participants compared to Baltimore participants.

When asked to identify where they primarily purchased fruits and vegetables when locally-grown produce was "in-season," more than half of participants (60%) selected "grocery/supermarket" (Figure 2). The second most selected outlet "farmers' markets/CSAs/on-farm market" was identified as the outlet of choice during this period by 29% of participants. Pertaining to other options presented, "specialty store," "supercenter," and "warehouse" were only selected by 3% of the participants, respectively, while other outlets were selected by 1% or received no responses.

Consumer Knowledge of Locally-Grown

While it is often suggested by local producers that food considered "locally grown" is produced within a 100 mile radius of the consumer (The Food Institute & The Hartman Group, 2008), it is necessary to understand the consumers' definition of the term. A majority of participants (77.4%) did indicate that they consider "locally grown" to be within a distance of 100 miles from their place of residence (Figure 3). When responses were examined further, the most common selected distance was 26 to 50 miles from their place of residence (selected by 28% of participants), with an additional 21% selecting 51 to 100 miles.

To better understand consumer knowledge of what produce items are grown in the Mid-Atlantic region, participants were asked to indicate, from a list of over 40 common supermarket produce items, what they believed was grown in the region. A significantly larger percentage of participants age 65 and older, compared to participants age 21 to 24 and 25 to 36, reported that corn, potatoes, and tomatoes are grown in the Mid-Atlantic region (Figure 4). Those age 65 and older were also more likely to indicate that corn and tomatoes were grown in the region compared to participants age 37 to 48. Additional differences are apparent when comparing responses of more mature age groups (e.g. 37 to 48 and 49 to 64) to the responses of consumers who identified with the 21 to 24 and 25 to 36 age groups.

Discussion

Select factors, such as participant age and metropolitan area of residence, appear to have an effect on where participants chose to shop for local food products, how they formed purchasing decisions, and their opinions and knowledge of local and Mid-Atlantic grown produce. Other factors, such as gender, education, income and ethnicity, also appear to have an effect on purchasing behavior.

These data can assist those involved in the Mid-Atlantic fruit and vegetable industry, such as growers, processors, retailers, educators, etc., to better meet the demands of consumers for locally-produced goods and educate them about what fruits and vegetables may be available locally.

Additional analyses conducted on the data from the four surveys will be used to further investigate the relationship between consumer demographics and psychographics, and purchasing attitudes, behavior and knowledge of local produce and food products.

Additional information is available at: www.midatlanticspecialtycrops.com

Literature Cited

The Hartman Group, 2008. Consumer Understanding of Buying Local. "HartBeat Online Newsletter, The Hartman Group, Inc. 27 February 2008. http://www.hartman-group.com/hartbeat/2008-02-27.

The Food Institute & The Harman Group, 2008. What Buying Local Means to Consumers: A Webinar from the Food Institute and the Hartman Group. 28 May 2008. http://www.foodinstitute.com/buyinglocal.cfm.

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