



Sustainable Marketing of Agro-Tourism: The Socio-cultural Perspective

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Abstract

Agricultural tourism has emerged as a niche tourism phenomenon and its demand has soared across the globe. This paper focuses on the socio-cultural sustainability of agro-tourism. Key socio-cultural dimensions, social capital and authenticity, are examined based on a purposeful sample of spatially dispersed farms in the US. The study results illustrate that agrotourism holds tremendous potential to strengthen and promote local food systems by promoting traditional ways of farming. Focus should particularly center on objective and negotiated dimensions of authenticity, social cohesion, trust and reciprocity. Marketing strategies promoting socio-cultural consumption of agro-tourism are suggested.

Keywords: Authenticity, social capital, sustainability, agro-tourism, and farms

INTRODUCTION

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Agricultural tourism has emerged as a niche tourism phenomenon and its demand has soared across the globe. It is regarded as a conduit that bonds people from particularly urban areas to the natural environment and cultural traditions. It offers spaces to gather knowledge about agriculture from farmers, indulge in activities such as fruit and vegetable picking and directly purchase fresh produce from farms (Siri 2020; Sonnino, 2004). Agricultural tourism offers a combination of tourism and recreation activities (Barbieri & Mshenga, 2008; Busby & Rendle, 2000) such as staying overnight at a farm, participating at an agro-festival or agro-event and enjoying activities such as harvesting agricultural produces, bird-watching, horse-riding, etc. Visitors, particularly, after witnessing the devastating impact of the pandemic are more mindful of how they consume food and gastronomic experiences in an authentic and healthful manner.

There is more consciousness towards the benefits of nutritional fresh food and a healthy lifestyle (Siri 2020). The consumers are keen to gather knowledge about the source of foods that they eat or to identify the first point in the supply chain where food is grown (NFU, 2015a). Therefore, a demand is surging to scrutinize agro-tourism from a sustainability lens and understand this phenomena from both demand and supply standpoints (Goyal, Chadha & Singh 2023; Sumardi, Najib, Mahomed, Dardanella et al. 2023).

Extant literature acknowledges the three pillars of sustainability: economic, environmental, and socio-cultural (Saarinen 2013, 2020; Vukolić, Gajić, Petrović, Bugarčić et al. 2023). Economic sustainability is often noted to prioritize needs of tourists without extending consideration to environmental impacts and views of the host community (Barbieri 2013; Chhabra 2010b). Environmental sustainability, on the other hand, is concerned about tourist numbers and carrying capacity of a destination. The third pillar promotes socio-cultural aspects of tourism and is mindful of the host community views and needs. It is important to promote tourism activities that complement preferences and activities of local communities, particularly, if their cultural and traditional resources are being tapped to draw tourists. According to Revert'e and P'erez (2017), tourism should have potential to fortify local identities and traditional ways of living. For instance, place attachment refers to a strong bond (Williams, Patterson, Roggenbuck et al. 1992) between residents and tourists that holds potential to foster social cohesion and pride in local culture (Ferrari, Hernández-Maskivker & Nicotera 2022). Furthermore, to promote socio-cultural sustainability of tourism, it is important to focus on factors that channel tourism to enhance

authenticity of local resources and strengthen social capital. In fact, extant literature recognizes the significance of promoting authenticity and social capital to support the socio-cultural pillar of sustainability (Amoako 2020; Ciani and Vörös 2020; Khazami & Lakner 2022; Kothari & Perwej 2021; McCracken 1998). Authenticity in this regard refers to traditional ways of living and respect and value for cultural lifestyle. Tourism demand for some versions of authenticity can enhance social cohesion and social capital such as participating together in traditional activities or gathering authentic knowledge. This study examines the social-cultural sustainability of agro-tourism by taking the perspectives of farmers who use their farms to offer agro-tourism experiences.

According to Kamble and Bouchon (2016) and McCracken (1998), the notion of social cohesion is multidimensional and relates to bonds between people. It is underpinned on trust, social connections, local self-esteem, sense of pride, and attachment. Ferrari et al. describe various aspects of social cohesion as “are social order, control, networks, capital and solidarity, together with reduction of wealth inequalities, common values and civic culture, place belonging, and identity” (2022, p. 119). The authors point out that from a socio-cultural lens, “sustainable tourism can have a profound impact on a community, as it brings together individuals working for a shared purpose, improves social capital and relationships, creates a sense of belonging and trust, encourages cooperation, teamwork, improves social relations, and creates harmonious relationships (2022, p. 119). Authenticity is another aspect of socio-cultural sustainability which promotes a local sense of pride, social cohesion and therefore social capital (Baimoratova et al. 2023). The notion of authenticity is significant in the socio-cultural component of niche forms of tourism such as heritage and rural tourism because niche tourists seek “genuine” experiences and value for authentic/traditional experiences can generate a position response from the locals. In other words, if tourists are mindful of local culture and traditions and generate economic benefits by buying local souvenirs and other products, locals are likely to develop a more friendly and welcoming disposition (Stanciu, Popescu & Stanciu 2023).

Agro-tourism has emerged as an alternative popular form of tourism that lends support to microenterprises and circular economy in rural regions. The term agro-tourism signifies an interconnected relationship between agriculture and tourism (Lane, 2018; Petroman & Cornelia, 2010). Farms, as agro-tourism settings, hold potential to generate genuine and long-lasting memories for visitors by offering opportunities for solitude and authentic experiences in natural

rural spaces (Joshi et al. 2020). In the context of farm tourism, local attributes are an asset such as natural appeal, atmosphere, hospitality of agritourism service supplier, cultural heritage, community involvement in hospitality, and venue safety (Hamayana 2021; Rodrigues & Virtudes, 2019; Saroyo & Mulyati, 2015). Agro-tourism has also been referred as agri-tourism in documented literature and described as an innovative agricultural activity that spans tourism and agriculture environments and diversifies the farm portfolio (Barbieri, Sotomayor & Arroyo 2019; Nimase 2020; Nugraha, Prayitno, Hasyim & Roziqin 2021; Sumardi, Najib, Mahomed, Dardanella et al. 2023). Nimase defines agro-tourism as a “practice of attracting travelers or visitors to an area or areas used primary for agricultural purpose and holds potential” to generate revenue for the farmers (year p. 1). Agritourism can also be defined as “visiting a working farm or other agricultural setting for enjoyment, education, or active involvement in an operation’s activities” (Gao, Barbieri, & Valdivia, 2014, p. 367). Sustainability is, in fact, the core emphasis of agrotourism destinations (Barbieri et al., 2019; Shukla, 2019; Streifeneder, Hoffmann & Corradini 2023; Sumardi et al. 2023; Vukolić, Gajić, Petrović, Bugarčić et al. 2023).

Agrotourism holds potential to embrace all key pillars of sustainability- economic, ecological, and socio-cultural (Susila et al. 2024; Vukolić et al. 2023). Its economic sustainability/efficiency ensures that tourism is a viable source of income and emphasis on satisfying consumer demand. Ecological considerations include generating minimal negative impacts on the natural environment by preserving biodiversity and responsible use of natural resources. With regard to socio-cultural dimensions, social capital and authenticity stand out. Social equity refers to generating equitable income, employment and promoting overall quality of life through civic engagement, personal development opportunities and fostering respect for socio-cultural values of the community (Buzoianu, Pargaru, Chiotan & Uta 2024; Nasihuddin, Pamuji, Rosyadi, & Ahmad 2020). This paper focuses on the socio-cultural sustainability of agro-tourism. In summary, this paper endeavors to answer the following research questions: What is the role of farms in promoting agro-tourism in rural regions? What types of authentic experiences are offered at the agro tourism farms that promote cultural authenticity? How are the farms promoting social capital? How does social capital intersect with authenticity to promote socio-cultural aspects of sustainability?

Literature Review

With regard to social capital, focus is on the social bonding between the farmers, the local residents and the visitors. A review of documented literature shows that social capital has multiple connotations (Carrasco & Cid-Aguayo, 2012). According to Coleman, social capital “exists in the relationships between people” (1988, p. 100). Social interactions and connections between people generate benefits (Currie and Stanley 2008). Coleman’s definition takes a holistic and integrated view and regards social capital as a public good. It is also about fostering bonds to ensure ongoing access to resources (Julien 2015). Based on the foregoing, social capital can be described as phenomena that is based on successful realization of mutual obligations grounded in trust, reciprocity and interchange of knowledge (Coleman 1988, p. 119).

It is important to recognize that social capital also encapsulates a variety of key environmental and psychological aspects of the community (Acedo et al. 2017). Place or spaces have become important attributes of social capital (Rutten et al. 2010). This notion holds a different value for locals and the tourists (Chang et al. 2015). As pointed by Baimoratova, Chhabra and Timothy (2023), social capital refers to community cohesion and survival such as through occupation, acquiring of property and, most particularly, by building social bonds. It specifically refers to relationships, social networks and interactions that arise through trust, reciprocity and cooperation. It is also postulated that attention needs to be paid to generating and promoting attributes of a place that are valued by locals as well as the tourists and offer a harmonious space for interactions and building of social bonds (Baimoratova and Chhabra 2023). As an instance, a multi themed restaurant can provide diverse and novel cultural atmosphere with food and service. A friendly environment can result in a memorable experience for the customers (Baimoratova et al. 2023). Farms hold potential to offer welcoming spaces that can facilitate social capital for the tourists, residents and other local stakeholders. Furthermore, although some studies have examined agrotourism from a cultural standpoint and authenticity (Andéhn & L’Espoir Decosta 2021; Baimoratova et al. 2023; Barbieri, 2013; Flanigan, Blackstock, & Hunter, 2014; Yang, 2012), insights based on delineated versions of authenticity is remiss. It has been extensively recognized that authenticity is not a monolithic phenomenon; it can be delineated into multiple dimensions such as objectivist, constructivist, negotiated, existentialist, and theoplacity (Chhabra 2010a, 2021; Steiner and Resinger 2006). This study aims to examine authenticity offerings at a purposeful sample of farms based on its various dimensions.

Undeniably, authenticity as a notion has permeated tourism literature. A perusal of documented literature identifies five prominent discourses on authenticity: objective, constructivist, negotiation, existentialist and theoplacity. The objective (sometimes referred as essentialist) school of thought supports cultural continuity, true versions of the original, genuineness such as made locally by indigenous or local communities (Chhabra 2021; Cohen, 1988; Theobald, 1998). It relates to that type of heritage/local tradition that is frozen and has not evolved with changing times. The constructivist school of thought is premised on the notion that prevailing market forces and environments shape demand for authenticity. Therefore, the demanded connotations mirror tourists' perceptions of authenticity (Chhabra 2008). Next, examples of constructivist settings are commodified cultures, pseudo settings and deliberately constructed backstages (Chhabra 2010a; MacCannell, 1992). Authenticity is modified to appeal to the audience and a capitalist stance is embraced. The negotiated theory, on the other hand, refers to a middle point, a tradeoff between the essentialist and constructivist concepts. It is regarded as a co-created by the suppliers and the consumers (Adams, 1996) and holds that objective authenticity can still be retained while meeting the market demand. And, if amended mindfully, it can "preserve traditions by generating demand or attributing value to them" (Medina 2003, p. 354). Commodification, in this case, can serve as a useful purpose in some case and help breathe life into some dying cultures, handicrafts or traditions.

The existentialist school of thought support the subjective negotiation of meanings and argues that these meanings shape authentic experiences (Uriely, 2005). This notion is described by terms such as "self discovery", "being true to oneself" (Steiner & Reisinger, 2006, p. 299), enriched living within optimized tourist moments (Wang, 1999) and Csikszentmihalyi's theory of optimum flow (Csikszentmihalyi & Csikzentmihaly 1990). In other words, the existentialist theory, therefore, advocates optimized experiences and a sense of exhilaration. Its negotiated version (theoplacity) "integrates cultural and social meanings with physical objects, thereby seeking negotiations with the essentialist ideology" (Chhabra 2010a, p. 795). Theoplacity is the second type of negotiation that adorns the authenticity discourse. In summary, authenticity notion can be broadly delineated into two perspectives: "as genuineness or realness of artefacts or events and also as a human attribute signifying being one's true self or being true to one's essential nature" (Steiner and Reisinger 2006, p. 299). The two conceptual rifts in the authenticity debate show "that

most scholars have rested their ideologies within the two visibly distinct theoretical streams: (1) essentialist and its variations and (2) existentialist and theoplicity” (Chhabra 2010a, p. 795). Information on motives of agro-tourists can offer insights on what type of authentic experiences are popular and whether they stimulate social bonds with the farmers and their employees and other stakeholders, including the local community (Susila, Dean, Harismah, Priyono et al. 2024).

Studies examining motivations of visitors to agrofarms or agro-related events is sparse. The next couple of paragraphs takes a cursory view of meager existing literature from the standpoint of authenticity and social capital and motivations of agro-tourists (Leo, Brien, Astor, Najib et al. 2021; Sutiarto, Arcana & Suprpto 2021). It is noted that authenticity and social bonding are regarded as one of the key motivators of visitors who patronize agro environments and farm spaces. As an instance, in examining visitors to an agricultural fair, Siri (2020) notes that key motivations are the desire for novel experiences, to participate in leisure activities and build new relationships while cementing existing relationships. The author also notes that these motivations differ based on gender and type of tourist such as solo versus group/family travelers.

Park, Reisinger and Kang (2008) write that a socially authentic aspect of the experience is interacting and bonding with the farmers and their community. For instance, the authors report that motivations for attending a food and wine festival includes enjoying new flavor, enjoyment, escape from the mundane, spending time with family, connecting with new people and bonding with the experts such as the food and wine specialists. Cultural immersion in a traditional agricultural setting is also reported by some authors (Jia 2020; Wang, Ying, Mejia, Wang, Qi, & Chan, 2020). For instance, Jia (2020) examines food habits of diners from different cultural backgrounds and finds that traditional food attracts the Chinese where as an enjoyable experience is a big draw for the Americans. Smith, Costello and Muenchen (2010) study an international culinary event and note that “food, event novelty, and socialization are push motivations identified for attending a culinary event; secondly, food products, support services, and essential services are pull motivations” (Park et al. 2008, p. 272). These studies confirm that authenticity (as a proxy for novelty and cultural uniqueness), socialization with family and other people and the specialized suppliers are key motivations for attending a food setting such as a culinary event or a farm or a restaurant.

Specific agro settings such as farmers market and farms are a big attraction for visitors seeking authentic food and cultural experience in addition to socializing in a pristine environment (Jolly and Reynolds 2005; Che, Veeck & Veeck 2006; Patricia, Suryawardani, Suamba & Wiranatha 2020; Srikatanyoo and Campiranon 2010). According to Jolly and Reynolds (2005), motives for participating in agricultural farm/Ranch activities include buying fresh and authentic produce (such as fresh/homemade), buying from the source (farmer), having an educational experience, the natural surroundings, relaxation and participating in farm activities in an authentic manner. Che et al. (2006) share three popular reasons for attending an agritourism site: authentic and fresh produce, experiencing farm activities such as picking vegetables, spending time and enjoying farm activities with family. These authors investigated consumption decisions and demographic characteristics of agritourism consumers. Seventeen agritourist motivations are noted by Srikatanyoo and Campiranon (2010) which can be grouped into: social, relief from stress, a niche environment, and wellbeing. Park et al. (2008) offer detailed insights on several motivational categories such as: mental relaxation (to escape from daily stress, physical), enjoyment (of scenery, life), natural niche setting (to enjoy the agricultural environment and experience farming life and activities and improve farming aptitude), novelty (to discover new places and unique experiences), and social (to seek family togetherness, making friends with likeminded people). Intervening factors that are likely to shape these motivations can be gender and solo versus family visits. For instance, visitors who attend with families are more likely to spend time together and escape the daily mundane life in addition to buying fresh produce from the farmers. Clearly, motivations reported by other authors are represented in Park et al.'s (2008) comprehensive list.

Insights into the motivations of agro-tourists' can offer important information from a sustainable marketing standpoint, particularly from the perspective of event planners and managers (Sekali, Suryawardani & Dewi 2021). Based on the foregoing, three most recurrent motives can be : novelty, authentic farm- related activities (such as fruit and vegetable picking, learning/training, gathering agricultural knowledge and skills and other types of farming related training), and social bonding (building new and fostering existing relationships with the farmers, other like-minded people and tourists and the family). As indicated, directly buying fresh produce from farmers is regarded as an authentic activity. Some studies note that agritourism visits are more influenced by pull motivations rather than push factors. In summary, a purview of documented literature shows

that authenticity (in the form of the setting, source and produce) and socialization are key reasons for patronizing farms. To meet these motivations, it is equally important to examine the initiatives of farmers and the manner in which they are meeting the motivations of tourists. This study takes a supply-side view and offers notable insights from a socio-cultural sustainability standpoint.

1. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Farms were identified from four spatially dispersed state across the US. These states are Virginia, Tennessee, Arizona and Oregon. Approximately 105 farms were selected. The basic criteria for selecting them was their key of focus on agro-tourism. Insights were obtained on tourism-related activities such a U-Pick products, season festivals, and farm tours. It was noted that Virginia promotes agrotourism farms on its state tourism website in a directory style whereas Tennessee promotes agrotourism farms on its government website, under the department of agriculture. Arizona promotes agrotourism farms on its state tourism website on various “trails” and corridors that visitors can traverse to visit the farms and Oregon promotes agrotourism farms on its tourism website through various “tours” that include farm visits.

An online questionnaire was designed and distributed using Qualtrics link. Farmers were emailed inviting them to participate in a survey for this project and the survey was sent to them followed by reminder emails over the next couple of months (February 10th, 2022 and March 5th, 2022). Response rate was 38%. The survey was divided into six sections. The aim was to elicit information on items such as socio-demographic characteristics of the farm owner, insights of visitors from the standpoint of the farm management, general information about the farm, social capital, sustainable supply chain and authenticity.

Socio-demographics of the farm manager/owner elicited for information on gender, place of residence, age and education. With regard to general information about the farm, answers were elicited on the following questions: How long have you been connected to this farm? Also, in what capacity? What is the original history of your farm? Does it use that history or heritage to shape its promotional materials and offer a heritage experience to its customers?

The section of social capital was included and the purpose of this section was to gather your insights on the manner in which the farms offer/promote ideas and activities with their customers, associated with the local ‘sense of place’ (commitment of customers towards a

destination that offers pleasing and unique experiences), networking (online as well as through hosting special events) initiatives, trust-building efforts, efforts to identify and promote common norms and values, and social interaction (when customers use the farm services- both during take-out or onsite) and relationship building efforts to retain the interest of their target markets.

Several questions were designed to elicit information on social capital. These included: How will you describe the identity of your farm the town/place where it is located? In which way do you feel connected to your neighborhood? In which way do you think your farm adds to the cultural heritage of the town/city? How do you integrate that sense of connection at your farm (For instance- through décor, language, menu design, special events, stories and/or flyers)? What kind of community events do you participate in that help forge a shared sense of identity and social bonding? How do you promote and share this sense of local and social identity with your customers? Do you think your customers are able to relate or connect with the identity of your farm? What initiatives do you take to attract visitors and motivate your customers to visit you again? How do you get involved with other community members to improve your neighborhood (please offer examples)? A few questions sought to obtain insights on the opportunities offered to encourage ideas from the customers to enhance sustainable practices inside the farm and in the vicinity; efforts to earn the trust of your customers and your neighborhood community; opportunities to promote a multicultural environment and efforts to create a sense of place and belonging at your farm; type of community events organized to offer opportunities for social interactions and inter-cultural dialogue and whether the farms are able to integrate them with their offerings; initiatives taken at the farm to contribute/promote the well-being of the local community and the town or city where the farmers is located and; community events the farm managers/owners liked to attend and the manner in which they were beneficial to them and their farm. The farmers were also asked if they made efforts to engage/socialize with their customers at those events.

To obtain insights on efforts to promote efforts to safeguard authenticity of the farm offerings, the following questions were asked: Does your farm showcase authentic displays related to its heritage or history or that of the neighborhood or town? How was your farm impacted by Covid-19? What, in your views, are the main strengths of your farm, from an authentic food standpoint? Information was also elicited regarding the competitors, the manner in which the farms

maintain their uniqueness. That, what differentiated them from the competitors and what were the challenges encountered by the farmers in selecting or while using local and sustainably produced ingredients?

As mentioned earlier, Qualtrics was used and the data was analyzed based on frequencies and measures of standard tendency. ATLAS-ti was used to identify themes from open-ended data. The answers were also content analyzed manually for cross-checking purpose Furthermore, two coders were used to check inter-coder reliability. It was found to be 90%. Post data collection phase was also conducted and answers (particularly open-ended) were shared with ten farm owners to ensure appropriate interpretation of data happened.

2. ANALYSIS

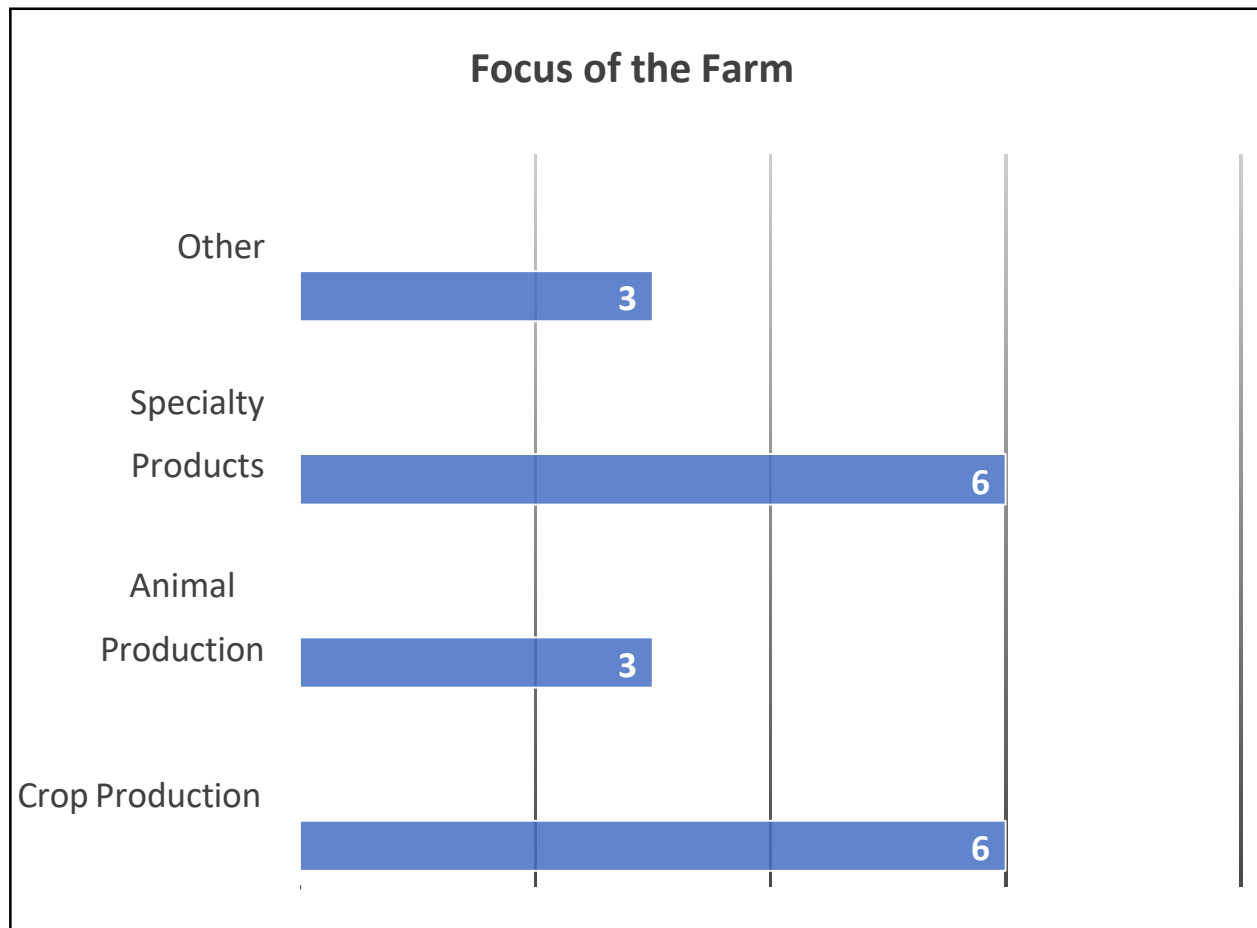
The majority of respondents are noted to be females, and the majority of the age group is between 41 – 50 years old. Most respondents have completed higher education. Average years in agrotourism business is 20 years and average years in farming is found to be 21. The average acreage of the farms is 369 acres, and the majority of the farms are open throughout the year.

The visitors at the selected farms are local as well as from other states in the US. Average time spent at the farm is three hours. Based on the content analysis of farm websites and the survey responses, as Figure 1 illustrates, it can be noted that the farms focus equally on their specialty products and crop production. Besides the ‘other’ category includes activities designed specifically for tourists such as “educational programs for kids, sunflower picking, pumpkin picking, strawberry picking, milking cows, cutting a Christmas tree, journeying through the corn maze, pony rides, and petting of animals.” Some farms have a farm store on premises and they offer house made food items and events for visitors to enjoy and immerse themselves in natural rural farm settings of scenic beauty. The following mission statements of a couple of farms notably capture their key focus: "Our mission is to share the agricultural experience by helping connect people, from our community and beyond, back to the land. Living close to earth is a lifestyle.

To be a farmer is to be an agronomist, economist, mechanic, entrepreneur, and common laborer. Farming is not just tilling the land, planting a seed and harvesting one's crop. It takes commitment and patience, but the fruits of the labor are well worth it. We want to share the joy of healthy living, hard work and of course, hard play." Another farm describes its mission as “an

authentic 150-year-old farmstead, from a time when the pace was slower and most everyone still grew a lot of their own food. Back then, most people filled their gardens with vegetables, flowers, and fruits to survive! Now we do it to thrive! Connecting with nature and goodness drives our efforts to offer you nature at close hand; to help you create a home refuge using well-chosen plants and healthful natural food grown on our farm and in your own garden." As evidenced in the above statements, authenticity is featured in a predominant manner in addition to social cohesion and health. In other words, traditions and cultural grounding make the farms unique from the competitors. Furthermore, the farms boast of their unique natural settings, conservation methods, mindfulness towards the environment, and visitor opportunities to purchase fresh produce and feel connected with the earth and the animals.

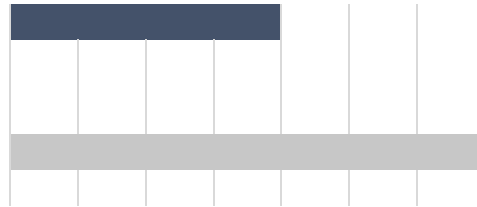
Figure 1: Focus of the Farm



As Figures 2 and 3 illustrate, a variety of programs and experiences are offered at the farms. Most farms highlight farm-based activities followed by hands-on activities, recreation self-harvest and traditional learning skills followed by non-agricultural recreation such as handmade souvenirs and overnight stay experiences. They also cross-sell from other farms and other complimentary businesses to demonstrate solidarity. Such cross-selling activities have been noted by several studies (Che et al. 2006; Joshi et al. 2020; Rodrigues and Virtudes 2019; Siri 2020). Other activities shared are group related aimed at strengthening family bonds, for the purpose of interaction and knowing other like-minded visitors. These physical activities offer opportunities for immersive experiences. Examples include self harvesting, U-pick and learn, learning activities such as traditional way of harvesting, houseplant basics, Rosecare, and life cycle stages of farm produce such as pumpkins and strawberries, ‘hands-on encounter with living things’ and planting in addition to “visiting the baby calves and the older calves, seeing the milking parlor, in store presentation about farm animals and dairy products, Visitors will learn about what the animals eat, and their life cycles.” Other activities and experiences include hosting of farm tours and non-agricultural activities such as riding ponies, interaction with a historian to learn about the town’s history and offering information on other local businesses which sell non-agricultural products and offer entertainment services such as theater shows, quilting etc.

Figure 2: Market Offerings at the Farm Site





Most farms describe themselves as authentic working farms because they use traditional ways of harvesting and offer activities in a socially engaging and culturally enriching manner.

Social Capital

Various social capital dimensions are identified in the survey responses. Table 1 offers a detailed breakdown of each dimension and the associated activities and programs. As evidenced in the mission statements of the farms and the survey results, several dimensions of social capital are noted such as social cohesion, trust and reciprocity (giving back and a shared sense of place). The farms connect with the identity of their home town and adhere to ethical guidelines by focusing on inclusivity and diversity.

Figure 3: Experiences at the Farm

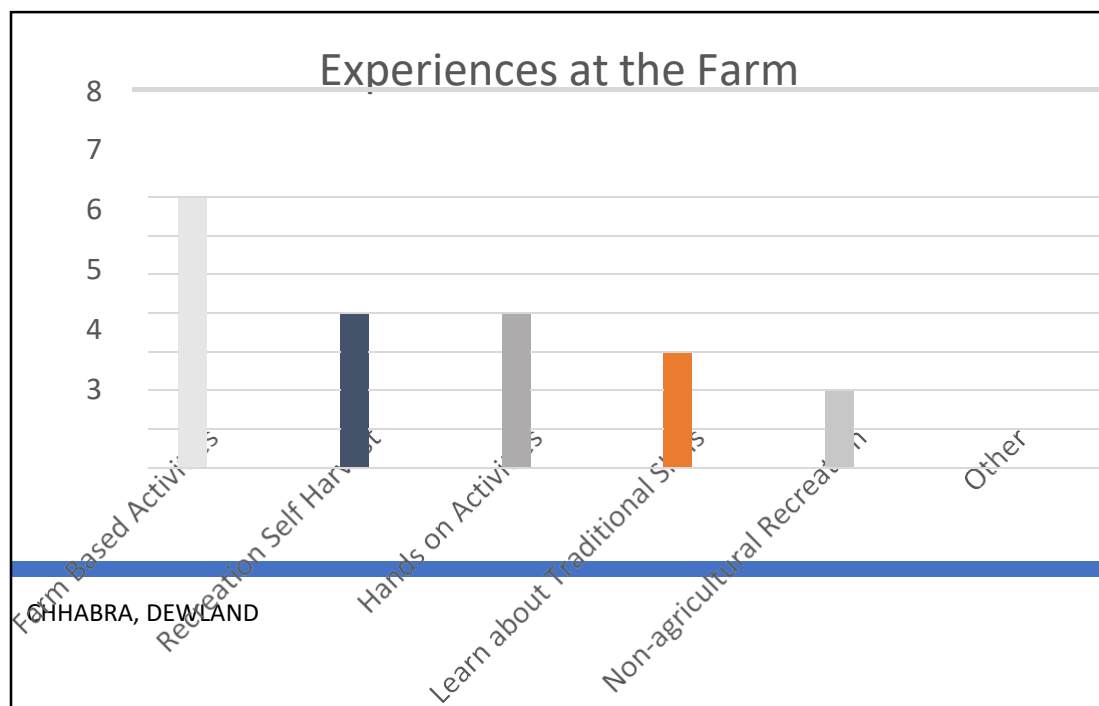


Table 1: Social Capital Dimensions

Social Capital Dimensions	Activities and Programs
Community wellbeing	Classes; event to support nonprofits
Improving the neighborhood	Use sustainable farming methods
Encouraging tourists to embrace ecological practices	Talking with consumers; promoting online
Shared sense of place and social bonding	Customer service; putting on events
Enhancing the identity of the town/place	Continues reputation of farming
Promoting a multicultural environment	Put on variety of festivals; partner with local nonprofits

In summary, social capital, a key component of sustainable agro-tourism plays a vital role in promoting agro-tourism. To examine the extent/type of social capital related with farm tourism, a purposeful sample of farms are surveyed by employing a multiple set of attributes that describe social capital such as: trust, sense of place and belonging, collective action, identity, customer involvement, community norm and values (Baimoratova et al. 2023, p. 3). Findings show that the farms closely stimulate social capital by connecting their venues with the town's heritage and sense of place. Also, they foster social capital by aligning themselves with the objectively authentic aspects of local and personal heritage and farming traditions. This can also be evidenced in their mission statements. One farm offers Farm Share Programs which help to foster mutually beneficial relationships. Some farms offer group rates for birthday parties, wedding venue, groups, and bonfire groups. Some host "company picnics, church events, family gatherings, and school groups." Approximately, 30% of the farms are engaged in community service. For instance, they sponsor local animal shelters, make donations to local elementary schools and fundraising events such as "Boys & Girls Club, St. Jude Children Hospital, James K. Polk Memorial Home and many others." In summary, from Table 1, it can be clearly seen that the farms promote and contribute towards social capital through a variety of ways and activities.

Authenticity

To determine the authenticity of the agro-activity and farm, a Word Cloud was created using ATLAS-ti (see Figure 1). The key themes identified from the answers of respondents were: Behind the scenes look at farming which shows how produce is grown and packed from "blossom to

bottle.” Commitment towards authenticity can be evidenced in the welcome messages for the visitors, maintaining an ethical work environment by ensuring inclusivity, commitment to their work. The farmers also ensure that that produce is authentic, that is, it is fresh, of good quality, and grown in the farm.

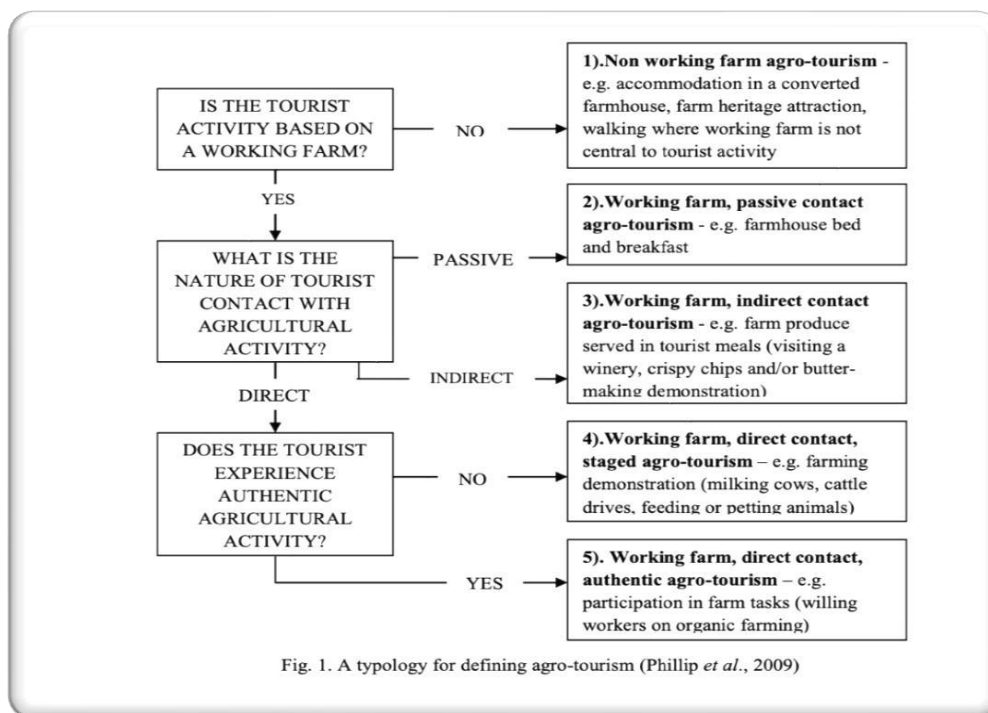
Figure 4: History Depicted in Farms



Objective and negotiated versions of authenticity can be identified based on the narratives of farmers such as we “offer behind the scene view, grow and produce what we sell; true farm experience without gimmicks, no hidden agenda or subterfuge- genuine and backstage views, local and home grown.” Authentic displays related to heritage or history are showcased in a variety of ways such as farm to table dinners, local and specialty crops, and history. It is also noted that the

farms ensured authenticity was maintained during covid times by staying true to themselves, ensuring traditional continuity, and safety and hygiene on the farm premises. Main strengths from an authentic produce and service standpoint are noted to be: adherence to history, genuineness, localness, honesty, and showcasing of backstage.

Figure 5: Authenticity and Agro-tourism



Intersection between Social Capital and Authenticity

Based on the foregoing, and as illustrated in Figure 2, the results from the survey and content analysis of the mission statements show that the farms promote three versions of authenticity, either simultaneously or individually: objective, negotiated and existential (Green & Philips 2014).

Several surveyed farms are working farms. They offer direct exposure to the farm operations and its various agricultural activities but in a somewhat staged setting to ensure safe experiences. Farmers make certain that the tourists experience authentic agricultural activities in numerous ways such as by U-pick activities, volunteering on farm tasks, milking cow and feeding/petting animals. Most of the activities are interactive and in groups or in the presence of the farm employees. They help stimulate social capital for the visitors as well as the farming community. By cross-selling other local non-agricultural products and educating the visitors about the area's heritage and history, some farms offer opportunities to immerse in both objectively, negotiated and to some extent existentially authentic experiences. In summary, the mix of authenticities promote trust, social bonding and reciprocity. Narratives build around authenticity and various dimensions of social capital, in the noted marketing messages, are designed to attract agro-tourists.

3. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Based on the survey data, it is evident that most surveyed farms offer a variety of activities such as U-Pick produce products, seasonal festivals, and hands on activities. Agrotourism holds tremendous potential to strengthen and promote local food systems (Rodrigues & Virtudes, 2019; Saroyo & Mulyati, 2015). For instance, it promotes local food consumption, conscious consumers and increases appreciation for local food (Barbieri, Sotomayor & Arroyo 2019; Ferrari et al. 2022; Nimase 2020; Nugraha, Prayitno, Hasyim & Roziqin 2021). Agrotourism is a viable form of sustainable tourism as it promotes all key pillars of sustainability. It is emerging as an important stimulus for rural development as it contributes towards social-cultural sustainability, environmental sustainability, economic sustainability and promotes localized food supply chains (Baimoratova et al. 2023; Sumardi et al. 2023; Susila et al. 2024; Vukolic et al. 2023).

This study shows that the farmers, as local producers, take numerous initiatives to create a bond with tourists which stimulates more local food consumption. By making social connections and offering learning and hands-on experiences, farmers are attracting and educating mindful visitors (Siri 2020). The initiatives by various farms hold potential to augment appreciation for local food. Farms are microenterprises and small businesses are usually rooted in cultural traditions (Roberts 2023). They are conduits of cultural and natural conservation. By focusing on true or close to true versions of authenticity and social cohesion, such microenterprises can stimulate

viable economic benefits for the farm and its peripheral areas (Jolly and Reynolds 2005; Che, Veeck & Veeck 2006; Srikatanyoo and Campiranon 2010). Selling handmade souvenirs at the farms is one way to promote local traditions.

In summary, farms constitute “an important part of the community system” (Roberts 2023, p. 299) and hold tremendous potential to promote socio-cultural sustainability by offering authentic activities that also holds potential to foster social bonds between tourists, between the farms and the local residents and between tourists and other agrotourism stakeholders beyond the farm premises. Based on the programs and initiatives of the surveyed farms, it can be noted that almost all farms promote social capital and objective and negotiated versions of authenticity on site. Almost 30% are more engaged with the broader community. According to Roberts (2023), social cohesion, cultural conservation, and equity are the key principles that form the core of socio-cultural sustainability; and at a micro level, social capital can be connected with “respect for community culture/s, local cohesiveness and pride, safe and enjoyable tourist experiences and residents’ control over their lives” (2023, p. 299). More farms should take initiatives to connect with other stakeholders in their town or region and co-ordinate programs with local organizations and businesses.

Studies focusing on sustainable agro-tourism promotion strategies in marketing literature are meager (Roslina, Nurmalina, Najib & Asnawi 2021). Park et al. suggest that agro-tourism marketing initiatives can “focus on the activities that seem exciting to the tourists, such as agricultural innovation or agricultural technologies. The activities may encourage participation and emphasize on strengthening of relationships such as by facilitating co-created activities among the visitors, their companions, and the organizers. When seeing images of such activities in a piece of advertisement, the tourists might be stimulated by the pull motivation such as a desire for leisure activities” (2008, p. 286). Going forward, this study recommends that it is important to examine the initiatives of farmers based on a lifestyle entrepreneur model. Future studies should also make an effort to suggest marketing strategies that specifically promote socio-cultural aspects of sustainability to enhance overall wellbeing of the tourists and the hosts. Farmers should collectively devise these marketing strategies, to attract target markets, in collaboration with the local destination marketing organizations and other stakeholders.

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