

What drives brand love and purchase intentions toward the local food distribution system? A study of social media-based REKO (fair consumption) groups

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ABSTRACT

Local food is gaining increasing popularity among consumers due to its association with sustainable consumption. However, for a product to be commercially successful, such growing popularity should translate into high purchase intentions and positive associations with the product post-consumption. Although this success has not yet been reflected for local food consumption, research in this area has remained limited. The present study addresses this gap by examining the antecedents of brand love for both the local food distribution system and the local food it distributes. The study thus employs the stimuli-organism-response (SOR) theory, which indicates that certain environmental stimuli influence the consumers' internal state or organism and shapes their behavior, in turn. Specifically, this study uses altruism as the stimulus, supporting local producers, transparency, satisfaction with labeling, and desire for labeling as the consumers' internal state (organism), and purchase intentions and brand love as the response. Cross-sectional data were collected from 2045 local food consumers associated with Facebook-based REKO (fair consumption) groups in Finland. Findings indicate that altruism is associated with internal state, i.e., desire for labeling, supporting local producers, and satisfaction with labeling. These variables, in turn, are associated with brand love for the local food distribution system. Furthermore, purchase intentions positively mediate the association of the four internal states with brand love.

1. Introduction

Consumers are now increasingly adopting sustainable and ethical consumption practices in their daily lives due to a heightened emphasis on eco-consciousness. Researchers have thus examined the consumption of organic food (Kushwah et al., 2019a, 2019b; Tandon et al., 2021) and local food (Memery et al., 2015) in this regard, finding that consumption of local food is gaining prominence as a practice that promotes sustainability (Mäkiniemi and Vainio, 2014). Although there is no clear definition of local food (Feldmann and Hamm, 2015), scholars define it based on the physical distance or the logistical steps taken between the places of consumption and production (Kumpulainen et al., 2018).

Scholars have suggested that to consider a product as local, it should have originated within 10–100 miles of its consumption (Adams and Adams, 2011; Feldmann and Hamm, 2015). Adams and Adams (2011) found that around 75% of respondents agree that local food must come from within 50 miles, with 70% of respondents believing that locally owned firms supply local food. According to Statista (2018), 96% of consumers, similarly, believe that local food must be grown or processed within 100 miles of the selling point, which clearly indicates that the understanding of local food is more complicated than mere miles and quantities. This definition of local food underscores the importance of considering the distribution systems through which these foods reach consumers.

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Consumers also associate local food with being produced in a small quantity and without the use of chemical or artificial additives (Motta and Sharma, 2016). The consumption of local food also evokes a sense of satisfaction among consumers since they believe that by making such purchases, they are helping local producers (Memery et al., 2015). Consumers prefer local food as it offers multiple benefits, such as low use of chemicals during production (Lim and Hu, 2016), support for local farmers (Jensen et al., 2019), and various ecological advantages (Zhang et al., 2020). Local food has recently gained popularity, trending in the US (Hedberg and Zimmerer, 2020), Europe (Kumpulainen et al., 2018; Skallerud and Wien, 2019), and other parts of the world (e.g., Lim and Hu, 2016). The sale of local food is thus expected to cross \$20 billion in 2020 (Zhang et al., 2020).

Locally produced food is becoming more and more prominent in Finland for three main reasons. First, consumers are becoming increasingly apprehensive about the food production process, its origin, and the materials used (e.g., chemicals and artificial additives) since these are related to health concerns (Kumpulainen et al., 2018; Skallerud and Wien, 2019). Second, Finnish people are motivated to act on climate change concerns and have adopted sustainable consumption practices, including local food consumption, as a form of pro-environmental behavior (Korhonen et al., 2017; Kumpulainen et al., 2018). Third, the Finnish government has given robust support to the local food producers (The Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, 2013), thus enabling the sufficient supply of local food for the Finnish population.

Despite consumers having a positive evaluation of local food (Kasslin and Valkeapää, 2014), the sales volume is only 8% of a total grocery store sales, which is substantially lower than such evaluations would suggest (Paloviita, 2014). One of the major obstacles in the growth of local food sales is the channels of distribution (Korpela, 2019), which is aggravated by the limited quantity of local food production and the small size of enterprises producing local food. These factors put local food producers at a competitive disadvantage in the main market, which is usually served by the big distribution or logistics firms (Korhonen et al., 2017). Therefore, the emergence of a new sale and distribution mechanism operated via the Facebook platform REKO to deliver local food (Aitojamakuja, 2020) is especially promising for local food producers in Finland. REKO stands for "Rejäl konsumtion," meaning fair consumption. REKO has become so popular that consumers consider it a synonym for local food in Nordic countries, which includes Finland, Sweden, and Norway.

REKO offers multiple benefits to both consumers and producers by making distribution easy and allowing consumers to buy local produce directly from farmers (Aitojamakuja, 2020). The exchange works in two ways: farmers get greater value for their produce as there are no intermediaries, while consumers receive local food that comes straight from the farm, is fresh, free from chemicals, and is aligned with their altruistic values.

A review of the prior literature indicates that drivers of local food consumption in the context of its distribution system are currently under-explored. No empirical evidence is available to explicate the link between altruism and brand love for local food and its distribution system, while multiple relevant factors, such as the motivation to support local producers, improve transparency, and the desire for and satisfaction with labeling, have never been investigated in this context. These gaps in the literature need to be addressed since sustainable development requires consumers to move toward pro-environmental behaviors, such as local food consumption. Examining the antecedents of local food consumption, as driven by its underlying distribution system, can help generate useful insights for producers of local food and aid them in devising effective strategies to attract consumers. Due to this, we aim to investigate the role of altruism in driving consumers to buy local food from REKO, which enables them to support local producers, provides transparency, gives satisfaction with labeling, and fulfills their desire for labeling, thereby determining the brand love (Carrol and Ahuvia, 2006) and purchase intentions of REKO group members.

To integrate all of these variables, the study utilizes stimulus-organism-response (SOR) theory as the theoretical frame. SOR theory indicates that stimuli (S) influence the internal affective state of a consumer or organism (O), which results in an approach-avoidance action or response (R) by the consumer (Fu et al., 2020). SOR theory is useful in explaining several consumer behaviors in the context of natural products (Kumar et al., 2021), organic products (Tandon et al., 2021), unusual purchase behaviors during the COVID-19 pandemic (Laato et al., 2020), and pro-environmental behavior (Chi et al., 2020). Based on the extensive review of the literature, we identify altruism as one of the dominant variables acting as a stimulus for pro-environmental behavior (e.g., Luomala et al., 2020; Panda et al., 2020). Therefore, we examine altruism as a stimulus in our study, in consonance with the fact that buying local food from REKO can help consumers behave in an altruistic way.

Based on the extant literature (e.g., Memery et al., 2015), we similarly recognize supporting local producers, transparency, satisfaction with labeling, and desire for labeling as representing consumers' internal state (O). This is reflected in how REKO helps and supports local farmers and consumers by providing greater transparency and, thus, higher satisfaction with the labeling of local food. Finally, we use brand love and purchase intentions to capture the consumer's response (R). Given that the mechanism of interaction among these variables could be more complex and dynamic than the anticipated direct associations, we also test the mediation effect of purchase intentions on proposed associations. Specifically, the study addresses two primary research questions (RQs). RQ1: What is the association between altruism (S), supporting local farmers (O), transparency (O), satisfaction (O), desire for labeling (O), purchase intention (R), and brand love (R)? RQ2: Do purchase intentions mediate the association between the variables representing organism, i.e., supporting local farmers, transparency, satisfaction, and desire for labeling and brand love (R)?

We assess the developed model using cross-sectional data from 2045 local food consumers of REKO groups in Finland, finding that altruism is significantly associated with supporting local producers, satisfaction with labeling, and desire for labeling. Moreover, supporting local producers, transparency, and satisfaction with labeling are associated with high purchase intentions and brand love. The findings also indicate a significant association between the desire for labeling and brand love, as well as between purchase intentions and brand love. Lastly, purchase intentions mediate the associations between three of the variables representing organism, i.e., supporting local farmers, transparency, and satisfaction with labeling and brand love.

This study primarily offers three novel contributions. It is the first work to use and empirically examine the application of SOR theory in explaining consumer behavior toward local food. Second, the research focuses on a new sales and distribution system named REKO, which is a local food distribution system based in Nordic countries. Such novel, online food distribution systems/groups have remained largely under-explored in the local food research. Third, the current study extends beyond purchase intentions to include a more global consumer behavior measure, namely, brand love, which is less examined in the context of local foods and their underlying distribution systems. The study findings thus offer a comprehensive understanding of brand love for local food along with its distribution systems. In a nutshell, the study contributes to theory by extending SOR to augment the limited literature on local food, online local food distribution systems, and sustainability, and offers practical insights for local food producers, managers, concerned organizations, and other stakeholders.

2. Background literature

2.1. Local food

There is currently no consensus in defining local food. Instead, scholars have offered multiple definitions, ranging from the distance of

travel to obtain the food (Adams and Adams, 2011; Canadian Food Inspection Agency, 2019), the distribution channel and marketing (Bavorova et al., 2016), and the emotive and community belongingness to the source of the food products (Feldmann and Hamm, 2015). The review of the previous literature suggests that two criteria are usually applied based on geographical delimitations. The first is the distance between the location of consumption and the location of production. A radius of 100-mile is the most widely used criteria (Durham et al., 2009), which can aptly include large cities as well as small localities. However, consumers often consider a radius of 30–50 miles for local food and 50 to 100 miles for regional food (Onozaka et al., 2010). The second criteria include geographical, political, or governmental borders, such as states or provinces. Food can be considered local when it originates in the same county, town, state (e.g., Darby et al., 2008), or even nation (Brown, 2003). The literature thus suggests that local food is not considered a definite element since it is perceived differently, depending on the social and spatial context (Carroll and Fahy, 2014). Carroll and Fahy (2014) found that people have several meanings associated with local food, which shows fluidity in how consumers and scholars understand the term. In other words, the meaning of local food is elastic, i.e., location can change the meaning, which can further stretch or contract based on the connection with local producers, its perceived availability, and relative distance to consumers' geographic locations. For instance, Canadian consumers tend to prefer beef from their home-province rather than products labeled as local (Lim and Hu, 2016).

The extant literature on local food primarily focuses on better understanding the benefits it offers to consumers. Scholars have ascertained that local products offer higher quality (Feldmann and Hamm, 2015), are considered more fresh (Lim and Hu, 2016), more nutritious (Bianchi and Mortimer, 2015), and tastier than other products (Jensen et al., 2019). These benefits are attributed to the shortened transportation time between production and consumption, which requires minimal use of chemicals or preservatives (Skallerud and Wien, 2019). Furthermore, scholars claim that local production and consumption shortens the supply chain, thus reducing the use of transportation fuels, which minimizes the emission of greenhouse gases and promotes sustainability (Bianchi and Mortimer 2015). Moreover, Zhang et al. (2020) found the significant role of cultural value dimensions on the fresh start mindset, which motivates consumers to buy local food. Gravina et al. (2020), meanwhile, suggested that the local food environment is determined by the socio-economic status (SES) of consumers, whereby high SES individuals consume excessive alcohol, high and middle SES consumers use sugar-loaded foods, and middle and low SES people consume fast food. In addition, consumers perceive that local product consumption actually supports local producers because the money spent on purchases remains within their community, thus strengthening the local economy (Jensen et al., 2019). Local food also brings a sense of transparency as consumers and producers might personally know each other (Holcomb et al., 2018). Furthermore, labeling on products ensures that produce is local, which speaks to the authenticity and quality of products (Aitken et al., 2020; Holcomb et al., 2018). However, no prior study has investigated the brand love for local food using SOR theory.

2.2. Stimuli-organism-response (SOR) theory

SOR theory, proposed by Mehrabian and Russell (1974), draws from environmental psychology to present a theoretical explanation for consumer behavior. It posits that multiple environmental variables act as a stimulus (S), which influences the internal state of consumers (O), which, in turn, influences their behavioral response (R) (Kumar et al., 2021). Stimuli refer to the environmental changes that are capable of influencing the physical and psychological well-being of consumers (Fu et al., 2020). Organism, meanwhile, refers to the internal processes and structures of individuals as expressed through thinking, perception, and feelings (Kumar et al., 2021). Finally, the response is the avoidance-approach outcome of the stimulus and organism (Fu et al.,

2020).

Several studies have utilized SOR as a theoretical frame to explore the consumers' response in multiple contexts, such as organic products (Tandon et al., 2021) and natural food (Kumar et al., 2021). The present study adopts this theory to better understand brand love and purchase intentions toward local food consumption. The two main reasons behind our choice of theory were: first, SOR theory utilizes external stimuli that influence individuals' internal processes and structures, which then determine the socially desirable behavioral response. This is crucial as the study reflects the perceived cumulative and positive benefits of consuming local food for the local economy and environment. Second, SOR delineates the unidirectional associations among its components through a parsimonious model, leading to the development of an overarching framework to explain the purchase intentions and brand love for local food. Furthermore, since SOR lends theoretical support to modeling the dynamic nature of consumer decision-making and captures the varying contours of consumer thought processes, spanning from environmental inputs to the internal state and, finally, an overt response, we contend that it is especially suitable for examining consumer behavior toward local food consumption.

2.3. Brand love

Brand love is defined as the extent to which a satisfied customer is emotionally and passionately attached to a particular brand or trade name (Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006). The concept of brand love is embedded in the theories of interpersonal love, which includes a brand association, positive emotions, favorable evaluation, and demonstration of love (Mody and Hanks, 2020), along with recommendation intentions and loyalty (Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006). Scholars have suggested that brand love goes beyond the existing concept of satisfaction and reflects a more global behavioral construct (Bagozzi et al., 2017), which they have explored in varied contexts. Brand love is also associated with word of mouth and willingness to pay (Albert and Merunka, 2013). Batra et al. (2012) investigated brand love in multiple product contexts and identified its three key elements, namely, favorable emotional attachment, integration of self with the brand, and behavior that is driven by passion. In the case of peer-to-peer accommodation booking (i.e., Airbnb), Mody and Hanks (2020) similarly found that brand love can be motivated by underscoring existential authenticity, intrapersonal authenticity, and brand authenticity. Scholars have further indicated that brand love is a typical outcome of a long relationship with a company or brand, as opposed to a transactional outcome, and is associated with individuals' identity (Bagozzi et al., 2017; Batra et al., 2012; Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006). Despite the importance of brand love as an expression of consumers' continued interest in the product or service, it has not been explored much in the context of local food and its underlying distribution system. We aim to address this research gap by conceptualizing and empirically examining the extent that the identified antecedents are associated with brand love for local food distributed through REKO.

3. Research model

The study conceptualizes a research model utilizing the SOR framework in the context of local food (Fig. 1). Altruism value is used as the stimulus in this framework for two reasons. First, altruism value influences pro-environmental behavior (e.g., consumption of local food), such as consumption of organic (Luomala et al., 2020) and green products (Panda et al., 2020; Song and Kim, 2019). Second, altruistic consumers are easily motivated by external stimuli, such as knowledge or regulations, which influence their purchase decisions (e.g., Wang et al., 2020). To assess organisms, the study utilizes four variables, selected after reviewing the extant food-related literature (e.g., Aitken et al., 2020; O'Hara and Lin, 2020; Shafieizadeh and Tao, 2020; Velardi and Selfa, 2020). These variables include supporting local producers, transparency, satisfaction with labeling, and desire for labeling. The key

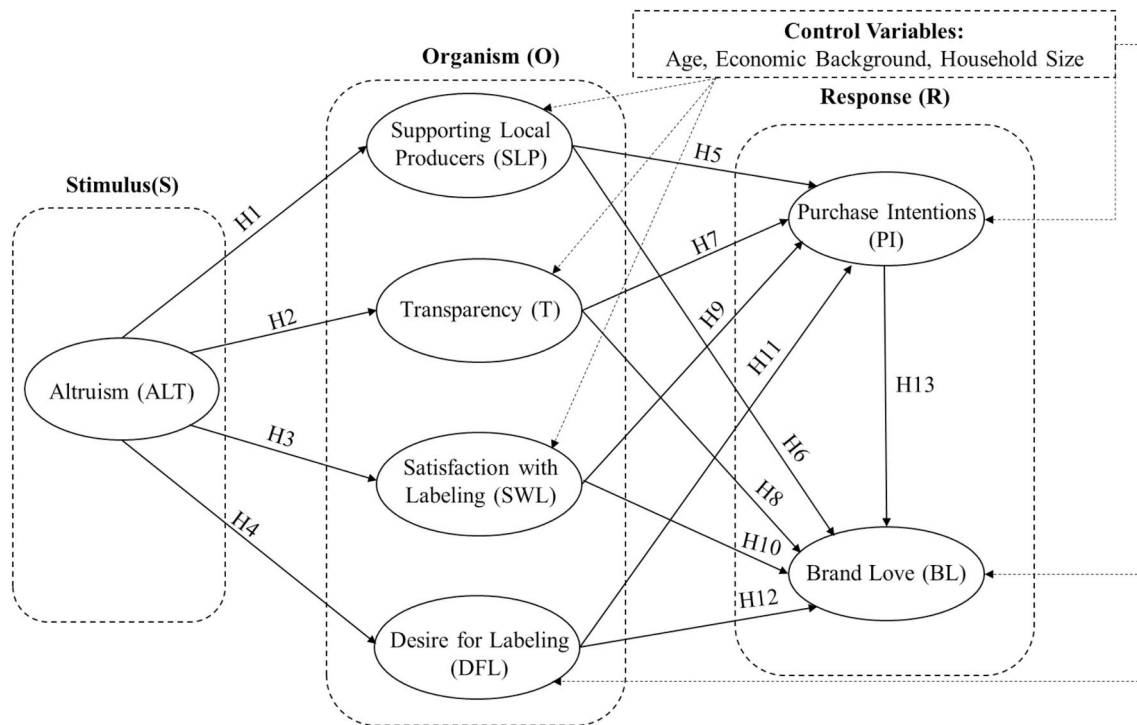


Fig. 1. Conceptual model.

justifications behind our choices of internal states are: first, these variables are primarily contextual and are important for better understanding consumer behavior governing the purchase of food (e.g., Aitken et al., 2020). Second, these variables represent the internal state of consumers, which determines the behavioral intentions of consumers toward local food (Kumar et al., 2021). In addition, purchase intentions and brand love are considered as the consumer response in the context of local food. We chose these two outcome variables as they are under-explored in the context of local foods and their underlying distribution systems. Table 1 presents a brief description of the study constructs.

3.1. Altruism

Altruism maximizes the outcomes of others without consideration for one's own outcome (Song and Kim, 2019). The prior food literature considers altruism value an important variable that is influential in explaining food consumption-related behaviors (Panda et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2020). Panda et al. (2020) and Song and Kim (2019), for example, have indicated that altruism influences consumers' intentions to purchase green products. Furthermore, altruism is associated with green brand loyalty (Panda et al., 2020). Scholars argue that consumers often select green or organic products to express their concern for the common good as a type of prosocial and environmental behavior (Wang et al., 2020). Prior studies (e.g., Hashem et al., 2018; Jensen et al., 2019) have also suggested that altruism motivates consumers to support local products because consumers place greater value on these purchases to change the globalized food system.

Since altruistic consumers are keen to benefit others through their actions (Panda et al., 2020), procuring local food through producer-driven distribution systems, such as REKO, can help altruistic consumers support local producers (Jensen et al., 2019). Consumers with a higher level of altruism are likely to demand greater transparency of information related to the origin and content of local food. This behavior is in consonance with past studies that have noted the need for transparency in the case of upcycled food products (e.g., Peschel and Aschemann-Witzel, 2020). We believe that altruistic consumers' need

for transparency might be driven by a desire for certainty about the authenticity of the local food being distributed. The same need can also serve as a plausible reason why altruistic consumers would expect that the local food being distributed by the system has labels with detailed product information. The extant research has also acknowledged the importance of labeling in the case of alternative foods, such as organic food (e.g., Aitken et al., 2020). In addition, local food product labels with detailed information are desirable since they can help consumers confirm that the distribution system is vending the local produce that they want. Furthermore, altruistic consumers' decisions regarding buying local produce from a given distribution system can also be affected by the availability of details about the ethical or environmental impact of a given product. This implies that detailed product labels may act as a source of satisfaction for altruistic local food consumers. Based on the preceding discussion, we hypothesize:

- H1.** The altruism of local food consumers is positively associated with supporting local producers.
- H2.** The altruism of local food consumers is positively associated with transparency.
- H3.** The altruism of local food consumers is positively associated with satisfaction with labeling.
- H4.** The altruism of local food consumers is positively associated with the desire for labeling.

3.2. Supporting local producers

Supporting local producers includes providing support for local farmers to boost the local economy (Memery et al., 2015). Previous studies have revealed that supporting local producers plays an important role in determining the purchase of local food (Bianchi and Mortimer, 2015). Similarly, Memery et al. (2015) contended that consumers purchase local food more often to support local farmers rather than because of the intrinsic quality of local food. In fact, in addition to freshness, nutritional value, and taste, support for local producers is a critical driver for the purchase of local food (Birch et al., 2018). Extending the

Table 1
Brief description of study constructs.

SOR Dimensions	Constructs	Description	Relevant studies
Stimulus	Altruism (ALT)	It refers to a personal value that may motivate consumers to exhibit pro-environmental behavior (e.g., consumption of local food) since it might benefit others	Panda et al. (2020); Song and Kim (2019)
Organism	Supporting Local Producers (SLP)	It is linked to consumer ethnocentrism, which causes consumers to perceive that not buying from local producers might put local producers out of work, thereby damaging the local economy	Memery et al. (2015); Birch et al. (2018);
	Transparency (T)	A thoughtful way to release all the available and publishable information, ensuring the availability of accurate, timely, and unequivocal facts to consumers about the actions, policies, and practices of the firm	Peschel et al. (2020); Shafieizadeh and Tao (2020)
	Satisfaction with Labeling (SWL)	It is the extent of joy that consumers derive from the local food labeling, which enables them to understand the difference between local and non-local products	Aitken et al. (2020); Meyerding et al. (2019)
	The desire for Labeling (DFL)	It refers to the extent to which consumers expect local food labels to disseminate relevant information that can assist in making a purchase decision	Aitken et al. (2020); Meyerding et al. (2019)
Response	Purchase Intentions (PI)	It refers to the extent to which consumers are willing to purchase or adopt a local food	Panda et al. (2020); Shahrudin et al., 2010
	Brand Love (BL)	It refers to an emotional and passionate association of consumers with a particular brand or trade	Bagozzi et al. (2017); Kumar et al. (2021)

idea of support for local producers, Berti and Mulligan (2016) have proposed the innovative idea of local food hubs for supporting local producers. Even further, O'Hara and Lin (2019) suggested that population density can determine the best channel for the delivery of local food while supporting local producers. The right type of distribution system can thus help signal to consumers that they are genuinely supporting local producers by buying local food from these channels. Accordingly, we argue that consumers are motivated to support local producers through various means of which buying local food from a reliable distribution system may be the most important aspect. Consumers with a greater motivation to support local producers are also likely to show more positive intentions to buy local food from a known distribution channel, such as REKO. Thus, we posit:

H5. Supporting local producers is positively associated with consumers' local food purchase intentions.

The extant literature on brand love suggests that consumers develop an emotional bond with brands when they are satisfied with the products (Bagozzi et al., 2017; Batra et al., 2012). Since local food consumers feel strongly about supporting local farmers (O'Hara and Lin, 2019), we argue that if local food distributed through REKO allows them to achieve

this objective, the consumers may get emotionally attached to local food distributed in this way. Furthermore, if procuring local food through REKO allows consumers to give greater support to local producers, they should then be likely to develop a stronger sense of positive association with this local food. Hence, we posit that stronger support for local producers may evoke an emotional attachment with local food distributed through REKO, as reflected through strong brand love for local food. Thus, we hypothesize:

H6. Supporting local producers is positively associated with consumers' brand love for local food.

3.3. Transparency

Transparency refers to the thoughtful endeavour of seller to release all available and legally publishable information to aid consumers in making informed decisions and to ensure the accountability of organizations for their activities and strategies (Shafieizadeh and Tao, 2020). Previous studies have shown that transparency helps in the formation of favorable consumer intentions and trust (Kang and Hustvedt, 2013). In the specific context of food, Devaney (2016) found that along with accountability and effectiveness, the transparency of governing structures is important in formulating food-related policy. In comparison, Peschel and Aschemann-Witzel (2020) indicated that greater transparency about sustainability initiatives only improves the choice of food products to a small extent. Drawing upon the extant findings, we expect that consumers purchasing local food through REKO may seek greater transparency from the distribution system, such as clarity related to the origin, contents, and production location. We further anticipate that the availability of such information is likely to enhance consumers' intentions to buy local food from REKO. Hence, we hypothesize:

H7. Transparency is positively associated with consumers' local food purchase intentions.

Previous studies have articulated that transparency strengthens consumers' positive perceptions of brands. For instance, Lin et al. (2017) revealed that green transparency influenced the perceived green value derived by consumers, which, in turn, improved their brand loyalty and self-brand connection. Lin et al. (2017) also argued that transparency enables consumers to understand the motives of a firm in engaging in green initiatives, which can impact consumers positively. Given that transparency is highly valued by consumers (Shafieizadeh and Tao, 2020), we contend that in the context of local food, if consumers perceive that REKO groups disseminate all publishable relevant data that can assist them in making informed choices, they may then develop emotional attachment and love for local food distributed by these groups. Hence, we propose:

H8. Transparency is positively associated with consumers' brand love for local food.

3.4. Satisfaction with labeling

Labeling on products is the first interface that a product has with the consumer; they are particularly important since the information they provide assists consumers in making purchase decisions (Aitken et al., 2020). Previous studies have found that having clear, transparent, and honest labeling on food products significantly impacts consumer choice (Hjelmar, 2011). Labeling is also important for giving information about genetically modified food, for example, to differentiate them from other food types (e.g., Velardi and Selfa, 2020). Meyerding, Trajer, and Leiberger (2019) also confirmed the importance of labeling in food purchase decisions, taking local tomatoes in Germany as an example. Further underscoring the importance of labeling of food products, Messer et al. (2017) recommended policy changes for food labeling. The preceding discussion clearly highlights the importance of labeling in food purchase decisions. We thus believe that local food consumers

place greater value on appropriate product labeling, which, if made available by REKO, would be a source of satisfaction for them, thereby increasing their intention to purchase local food. Hence, we hypothesize:

H9. Satisfaction with labeling is positively associated with consumers' local food purchase intentions.

Previous studies have also acknowledged the importance of product labeling in consumers' food-related decision-making (e.g., Aitken et al., 2020; Meyerding et al., 2019). While all consumers need information through product labels, for example, they may attach a varying level of importance to different schemes of labeling food products (e.g., Gracia and de-Magistris, 2016), indicating that the labeling scheme can also increase the satisfaction of consumers. In turn, this satisfaction is likely to evoke positive emotions about the product. Extrapolating this to the context of local food, we argue that consumers' increased satisfaction with labeling is likely to create an emotional and passionate connection with local food distributed by REKO, as reflected in improved brand love for local food. Hence, we posit:

H10. Satisfaction with labeling is positively associated with consumers' brand love for local food.

3.5. Desire for labeling

Scholars have acknowledged the important role of labels in persuading consumers to make positive food-related decisions (Messer et al., 2017). Consumers expect all products to be labeled with enough information to assist them in their purchase decision (Gracia and de-Magistris, 2016; Hjelmar, 2011). Local food consumers are also likely to expect products to be duly labeled with information about the origin, date of production, content, and other critical information about the local food being distributed. We anticipate that consumers with a desire for labels on local food products to help them in their decision-making are also likely to show greater intentions to buy local food distributed by REKO. Hence, we propose:

H11. The desire for labeling is positively associated with consumers' local food purchase intentions.

In addition to impacting purchase intentions positively, the desire for labeling may also increase consumers' positive assessment of the underlying product. For example, Aitken et al. (2020) revealed that the desire for labeling builds a positive attitude toward organic products since it usually includes information related to the environmental, health, and ethical impact of the product. In the context of local food, the desire for labeling can also be expected to evoke positive emotions among consumers. These emotions are related to local food and the underlying distribution system, such as REKO, and are thus likely to build passionate connections between the consumer and brand. Hence, we hypothesize:

H12. The desire for labeling is positively associated with consumers' brand love for local food.

3.6. Purchase intentions and brand love

Consumers who are satisfied with a product are likely to repeat their purchase behavior, thereby exhibiting a greater loyalty toward the brand. In other words, what begins as a positive intention gets translated into a certain amount of attachment, emotional association, and loyalty when the product satisfies the consumers. Scholars have contended that such loyalty and positive associations are actually expressions of brand love (e.g., Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006; Mody and Hanks, 2020). They have further confirmed the existence of a positive relationship between purchase intentions, emotional association with the brand, and brand love (e.g., Nikhashemi et al., 2019). We, therefore, expect consumers with positive purchase intentions toward local food distributed by REKO to have a higher emotional association with the local food thus distributed.

Hence, we posit:

H13. Consumers' purchase intentions are positively associated with their brand love for local food.

3.7. Mediation effect of purchase intentions

Past studies have revealed the mediating role of purchase intentions in the association between the identified antecedents and actual behavior (e.g., Aitken et al., 2020; Panda et al., 2019; Nikhashemi et al., 2019). Since the literature around local food consumption and brand love is still growing, the evidence that purchase intentions may mediate certain associations has motivated us to examine whether such a possibility exists in the case of local foods. If positive purchase intentions are found to further enhance brand love toward local food, then local food producers and marketers can leverage this association to better engage with consumers and influence their decision-making process. Even though there is no a priori basis for this, we examine the mediating role of purchase intentions in the association of variables representing organism, namely, supporting local producers, transparency, satisfaction with labeling, and desire for labeling, with brand love. Thus, we hypothesize that:

H14a-d. Purchase intentions positively mediate the association of consumers' brand love with supporting local producers, transparency, satisfaction with labeling, and desire for labeling toward local food.

3.8. Control variables

The study uses age, economic background, and household size as control variables. Prior studies have suggested that demographic factors can influence the consumption of organic products, including food (Tandon et al., 2021). The economic background of households (Larson, 2018) and individuals (Hwang, 2016), for example, can affect the purchase intention of organic food. Moreover, Bryla (2016) found that environmental friendliness and taste are the prime reasons for choosing organic food for younger and older consumers, respectively. Thus, in line with previous studies (e.g., Tandon et al., 2021), we investigate local food consumption behavior through the proposed hypotheses by keeping age, household size, and economic background as control variables.

4. Method and data

This section outlines the measurement scale, research context, data collection, demographic profile of respondents, and method of data analysis.

4.1. Measurement scale

We used a survey-based structured questionnaire to collect data from the target respondents. In addition to details related to the demographic profile of the respondents, the survey consisted of items derived from multiple sources to measure the constructs: altruism from Loureiro and Lotade (2005) and Huh (2011), supporting local producers from Memery et al. (2015), satisfaction with labeling and desire for labeling from Aitken et al. (2020), purchase intentions from Shaharudin et al. (2010), and brand love from Kumar et al. (2021). The authors developed the items used to measure transparency and duly validated them before analysis. To ensure face and content validity, we first sent the survey to three researchers working in the area of local food consumption. Their feedback led to minor revisions to the survey items. We then conducted a pilot study with 10 Finnish consumers. Based on their feedback, changes, such as restructuring sentences or removing ambiguous statements, were made in the initial questionnaire to prepare the final survey. Table 1 presents the final set of items used to measure the identified latent constructs. The final response for all items was collected on a

five-point Likert scale.

4.2. Research context

The research context for this study is Finnish-speaking REKO group members on Facebook. REKO (Rejäl komsumtion) is a unique sales and distribution system founded in 2013, through which consumers can directly order products from local producers without the involvement of any intermediaries. The REKO system works in closed groups on Facebook, where buyer and producer mutually decide upon the ordering and delivery of local food. More than 500 such networks are operating in Scandinavia (Aitojamakuja, 2020), while in Finland, close to 195 listed REKO groups are active, with members ranging from a few hundred to 19,000 (Einiö, 2020). There are four guiding principles for REKO groups: (a) products should be local, (b) retail selling is prohibited, (c) products should be ethically or organically produced, and (d) transparent operations, wherein the producer must provide information on production (Aitojamakuja, 2020). These principles are evident in the working style of the members, which benefits all. REKO enables consumers to have more information about the production process and its origins and to support the environment by reduced packaging and transportation, directly support local farmers, and avoid middlemen and marketing efforts that increase the product price. REKO enables producers, meanwhile, to sell their products in nearby locations reducing food waste, unnecessary storage costs, reduce transportation costs, and receive valuable feedback from consumers (European Commission, 2016).

4.3. Data collection

To begin with, we conducted semi-structured interviews with nine local food consumers and 10 non-consumers to determine the favorable and unfavorable factors that drive or prevent individuals from consuming local food. The inputs from this qualitative study were used to adapt the measurement scales to the context of the study. We collected data for this study from the members of Facebook-based REKO groups, which allowed us to reach out to a larger pool of respondents, collect data from generally difficult-to-sample populations, gain responses due to Facebook's inherently social nature, which supports sharing content, as well as allowing us to collect data at low cost and better understand respondents through analyzing their public profile data (Schneider and Harknett, 2019). Furthermore, in the context of the current study, Facebook is most suitable for data collection since this is the platform on which REKO groups operate. The survey was kept open for ten days, with only two reminders posted to prevent the procedural bias that comes from pressuring participants to respond quickly. After discarding the irrelevant or incomplete responses, a total of 2045 responses were taken for analysis. Of these, 9.7% of respondents were aged between 18 and 30, 22.7% between 31 and 40, 23.5% between 41 and 50, 31.7% were aged between 51 and 64, and 12.4% were aged more than 65. Moreover, 92.3% (n = 2076) of respondents were female, and 7.7% (n = 174) were male. Furthermore, respondents' monthly earnings (in Euros) were distributed as follows: 15.7% (<1500), 28.9% (1500–2499), 29.2% (2500–3499), 14.5% (3500–4499), and 11.7% (>4500). Household size data indicated that 15.5% were staying alone, 47.2% belonged to a household of two people, 15.3% belonged to a household of three people, and the remaining 22% belonged to larger households comprising four or more people.

4.4. Method of data analysis

The present study employed the two-step covariance-based structural equation modeling (CB-SEM) in SPSS AMOS for data analysis. CB-SEM is a popular data analysis approach utilized by many recent studies (Talwar et al., 2019; Kaur et al., 2020). It is a suitable data analysis method for this study since the collected data met the sample size and

multivariate requirements of normality and multicollinearity, as discussed by recent studies (e.g., Talwar et al., 2020b).

5. Results

5.1. Data normalcy and common method bias (CMB)

Before proceeding to the analysis, we examined data normalcy in the collected data. The reported values of skewness and kurtosis were well within the acceptable range of +3 to -3. Since we collected the data for all of the dependent and independent variables through a single instrument in this study, the possibility of common method bias exists, which can lead to spurious variances. Accordingly, we used Harman's single factor test to examine whether the data under the current study had CMB in concurrence with recent studies (e.g., Talwar et al., 2020a). The result indicated that a single factor could explain only 17.66% of the variance, which was much less than the cut-off limit of 50% (Podsakoff et al., 2012). This indicated that the data is devoid of CMB and suitable for further statistical analysis.

5.2. Measurement model

We performed confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to evaluate the measurement model and assess the reliability and validity of constructs. The fit indices of the measurement model (i.e. $\chi^2/df = 3.56$, CFI = 0.98, TLI = 0.98, RMSEA = 0.04) suggested a good fit with the sample data, in concordance with the recommendation (Hair et al., 2010; Tabachnick and Fidell, 2007). The factor loadings for all the items are above 0.7 (Table 2), which is well above the recommended threshold value of 0.40 (Hair et al., 2010). We assessed the average variance extracted (AVE) to

Table 2
Factor loading of measurement items.

Study Measures	Measurement items	CFA	SEM
Altruism (ALT) (Loureiro and Lotade 2005; Huh 2011)	Sales benefit should go to others	.89	.91
	Economic gains should be shared with others	.92	.89
Supporting Local Producers (SLP) Memery et al. (2015)	I buy food from REKO because it supports local producers	.89	.89
	I buy food from REKO because it supports local farmers	.86	.86
	I buy food from REKO because it supports the local economy	.47	.47
Transparency (T) (Developed through qualitative study)	I buy food from REKO because I know of its origin	.89	.89
	I buy food from REKO because I know where it comes from	.92	.92
	I buy food from REKO because I know what it contains	.55	.55
Satisfaction with Labeling (SWL) Aitken et al. (2020)	Most food from REKO is clearly labeled, so I can tell whether it is locally produced or not from the packaging	.43	.43
	While shopping, I can easily distinguish between local food and non-local food	.90	.90
The desire for Labeling (DFL) Aitken et al. (2020)	It is easy to identify local food products	.86	.85
	There should be specific information on labels explaining the health benefits of food sold at REKO gatherings	.55	.55
	I would like specific information on labels explaining the ethical impact of food sold at REKO gatherings	.99	.98
Purchase Intentions (PI) (Talwar et al., 2020a)	I would like specific information on the label explaining the impact that food sold at REKO gatherings has on the environment	.87	.87
	I would buy food products from REKO	.77	.77
	I plan to consume local food products sold at REKO	.71	.71
Brand Love (BL) Kumar et al. (2021)	I love REKO	.78	.78
	I am passionate about REKO	.91	.91
	I am very attached to REKO	.87	.87

confirm the convergent validity of all constructs. Table 3 presents the AVE values, which are above the cut-off value of 0.5, thus confirming convergent validity (Hair et al., 2010). We further confirmed the internal consistency in the scale items since the value of composite reliability (CR) for all constructs is above the threshold value of 0.7 (Table 3) (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). Another key measure, discriminant validity, is also established for all constructs, with the inter-construct correlations being less than the square roots of the respective AVE values (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). Furthermore, HTMT analysis also reports the presence of discriminant validity since the correlations among the study constructs were less than the recommended threshold value of 0.85 (Henseler et al., 2015) (see Table 4).

5.3. Structural model

We tested the proposed hypotheses through structural model analysis, which returned a good model fit (i.e. $\chi^2/df = 3.79$, CFI = 0.97, TLI = 0.97, RMSEA = 0.04), in line with prior recommendations. The results of the path analysis indicated an association between altruism and supporting local producers (H1: $\beta = -0.05$, $p < 0.05$), transparency (H2: $\beta = -0.03$, $p > 0.05$), satisfaction with labeling (H3: $\beta = -0.12$, $p < 0.001$), and desire for labeling (H4: $\beta = 0.18$, $p < 0.001$). Findings also confirmed the association between supporting local producers and purchase intentions (H5: $\beta = 0.19$, $p < 0.001$) and brand love (H6: $\beta = 0.11$, $p < 0.001$); between transparency and purchase intentions (H7: $\beta = 0.15$, $p < 0.001$) and brand love (H8: $\beta = 0.10$, $p < 0.001$); between satisfaction with labeling and purchase intention (H9: $\beta = 0.10$, $p < 0.001$) and brand love (H10: $\beta = 0.22$, $p < 0.001$); and between desire for labeling and purchase intentions (H11: $\beta = 0.02$, $p > 0.05$) and brand love (H12: $\beta = 0.06$, $p < 0.01$). Moreover, the results indicated a positive association between purchase intentions and brand love (H13: $\beta = 0.33$, $p < 0.001$). In sum, the results of the hypotheses testing presented in Fig. 2 and Table 5 indicate that except for H2 and H11, all hypotheses are supported, though the results of H1 and H3 reveal an unanticipated negative association. Furthermore, the variance explained by the structural model is as follows: 0.4% for supporting local producers, 1.4% for transparency, 2.8% for satisfaction with labeling, 4.7% for desire for labeling, 9.8% for purchase intentions, and 24.2% for brand love.

5.4. Mediation analysis

Mediation analysis indicated that purchase intentions partially mediated the relationship between supporting local producer and brand love, between transparency and brand love, and between satisfaction with labeling and brand love. However, purchase intentions did not exhibit any mediating influence among the association of desire for labeling and brand love (see Tables 6 and 7). Table 6 represents the indirect effect of purchase intentions on the relationship. In sum, three mediation hypotheses, i.e., H14a, H14b, and H14c, are supported.

5.5. Control variables

The analysis of age reported a significant confounding influence on: transparency ($\beta = 0.11$, $p < 0.001$), satisfaction with labeling ($\beta = 0.11$,

Table 3
Validity and reliability analysis.

	Mean	SD	CR	AVE	MSV	ASV	SLP	T	SWL	DFL	PI	ALT	BL
SLP	4.63	.49	.80	.58	.09	.04	.76						
T	4.76	.42	.84	.65	.09	.04	.29***	.80					
SWL	3.62	.84	.79	.57	.09	.03	.14***	.17***	.76				
DFL	2.26	.96	.86	.68	.03	.01	.00	.04	-.03	.82			
PI	4.43	.65	.71	.55	.16	.05	.24***	.21***	.13***	.03	.74		
ALT	4.63	.51	.90	.81	.03	.01	-.04	-.03	-.12***	.18***	-.09**	.90	
BL	3.39	.97	.89	.73	.16	.06	.24***	.24***	.29***	.07**	.40***	-.06*	.85

Note: Composite reliability = CR, Average variance extracted = AVE, Maximum shared variance = MSV, Average shared variance = ASV.

Table 4
HTMT analysis.

	SLP	T	SWL	DFL	PI	ALT	BL
SLP							
T	.35						
SWL	.22	.27					
DFL	.05	.04	.01				
PI	.28	.24	.15	.00			
ALT	.04	.05	.14	.21	.09		
BL	.30	.29	.35	.08	.41	.06	

$p < 0.001$), purchase intentions ($\beta = -0.13$, $p < 0.001$) and brand love ($\beta = 0.08$, $p < 0.001$). In contrast, economic background exerted a significant confounding effect on desire for labeling ($\beta = -0.08$, $p < 0.001$) and brand love ($\beta = -0.07$, $p < 0.001$). Finally, household size controlled desire for labeling ($\beta = -0.08$, $p < 0.001$) and purchase intentions ($\beta = -0.08$, $p < 0.001$).

6. Discussion

6.1. Stimulus and organism

We proposed the association of a stimulus (altruism) with variables representing the consumers' internal state or organism, i.e., supporting local farmers, transparency, satisfaction, and desire for labeling through RQ1. The results of the statistical analysis revealed several interesting results. To begin with, the findings of the study indicated a significant but unexpected negative association between altruism and supporting local producers (H1), which contradicts the findings of previous studies (e.g., Jensen et al., 2019; Panda et al., 2020). A possible explanation could be that consumers expect local farmers to be self-reliant. These self-reliant farmers would, in turn, be able to produce good quality food and sell it by themselves through the distribution system without relying on the altruistic support of others. However, such a negative association does not seem plausible. Therefore, further research is required, taking into consideration the individual differences among consumers before any conclusive inference can be drawn. Similarly, the study findings did not support the hypothesized association between altruism and transparency (H2), against our anticipation based on the prior literature (e.g., Peschel and Aschemann-Witzel, 2020). A possible reason for this non-significant association could be that consumers know that REKO maintains complete transparency in every exchange. Therefore, it may be seen as an essential underlying feature of the system rather than something that may or may not be present.

The study results also indicated a negative relationship between altruism and satisfaction with labeling (H3), further contradicting the previous studies (e.g., Aitken et al., 2020). A possible reason for such a finding could be that altruistic consumers expect the local food producers to acknowledge the support given to them by consumers. This may imply that consumers expect some form of acknowledgment, but as this has been mostly absent from the product labeling, it may thus induce a negative association.

Next, the results revealed a positive association between altruism and desire for labeling (H4), in consonance with prior findings (e.g.,

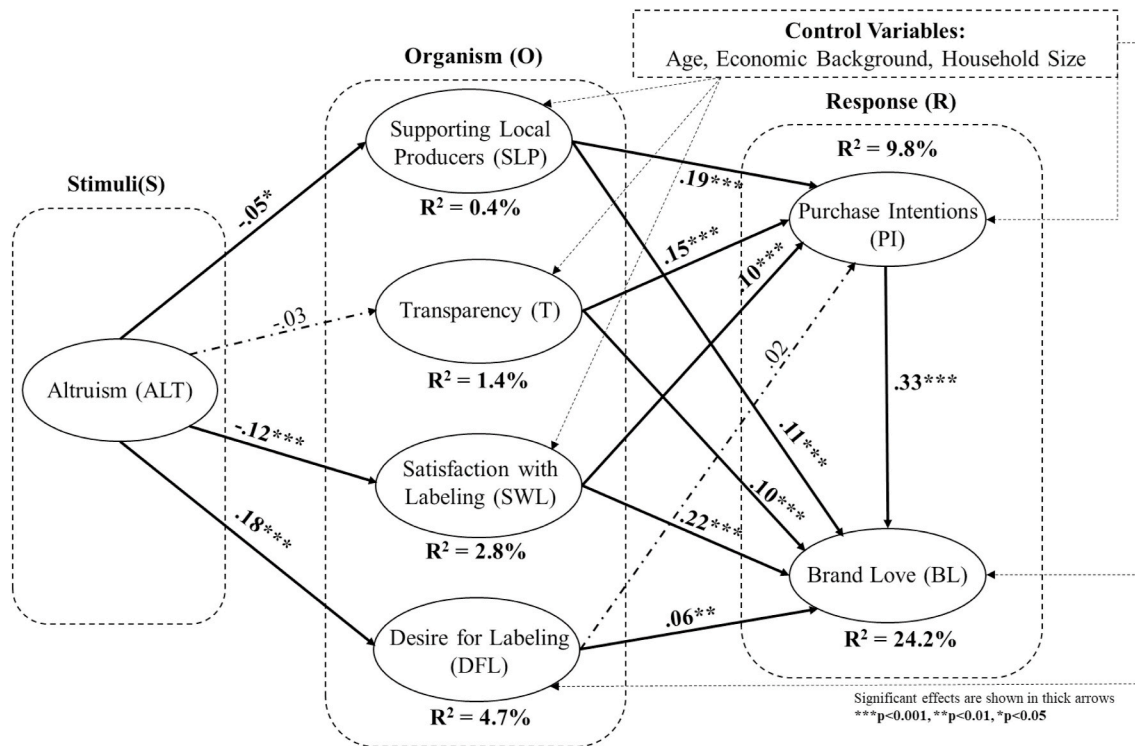


Fig. 2. Results of hypothesis testing.

Table 5 Hypothesis results.

Hypothesis	Path	β	p	Support
H1	Altruism → Supporting local producers	-0.05	<0.05	Yes
H2	Altruism → Transparency	-0.03	>0.05	No
H3	Altruism → Satisfaction with labeling	-0.12	<0.001	Yes
H4	Altruism → Desire for labeling	0.18	<0.001	Yes
H5	Supporting local producers → Purchase intentions	0.19	<0.001	Yes
H6	Supporting local producers → Brand love	0.11	<0.001	Yes
H7	Transparency → Purchase intentions	0.15	<0.001	Yes
H8	Transparency → Brand love	0.10	<0.001	Yes
H9	Satisfaction with labeling → Purchase intentions	0.10	<0.001	Yes
H10	Satisfaction with labeling → Brand love	0.22	<0.001	Yes
H11	The desire for labeling → Purchase intentions	0.02	>0.05	No
H12	The desire for labeling → Brand love	0.06	<0.01	Yes
H13	Purchase intentions → Brand love	0.33	<0.001	Yes

Aitken et al., 2020). This finding suggests that consumers who believe that sales benefits and economic gains should be shared with others have a strong desire for product labels of local produce sold by the distribution system to give detailed information about the health-related benefits, ethical implications, and environmental outcome of the food product.

6.2. Organism and response

The study also proposed an association of the variables representing organism, i.e., supporting local farmers, transparency, satisfaction, and desire for labeling, with a response in the form of purchase intentions and brand love through RQ1. The findings confirmed that supporting local farmers is positively associated with purchase intentions (H5) and

Table 6 Results of mediation analysis.

SLP → PI → BL						
	β	Se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
SLP → PI	.28	.03	9.71	.00	.2236	.3367
SLP → BL	.39	.04	9.32	.00	.3069	.4705
PI → BL	.42	.03	13.53	.00	.3617	.4843
Total effect of SLP → BL	.51	.04	11.92	.00	.4238	.5906
T → PI → BL						
	β	Se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
T → PI	.29	.03	8.47	.00	.2204	.3532
T → BL	.46	.05	9.52	.00	.3658	.5555
PI → BL	.43	.03	13.83	.00	.3688	.4907
Total effect of T → BL	.58	.05	11.74	.00	.4864	.6814
SWL → PI → BL						
	β	Se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
SWL → PI	.09	.02	5.05	.00	.0525	.1191
SWL → BL	.29	.02	12.26	.00	.2413	.3332
PI → BL	.44	.03	14.61	.00	.3835	.5024
Total effect of SWL → BL	.33	.02	13.30	.00	.2773	.3732
DFL → PI → BL						
	β	Se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
DFL → PI	.00	.02	.04	.97	-.0288	.0299
DFL → BL	.07	.02	3.17	.00	.0254	.1080
PI → BL	.48	.03	15.55	.00	.4231	.5452
Total effect of DFL → BL	.07	.02	3.01	.00	.0233	.1106

Table 7 Indirect effects between dependent and independent variable.

	Effect	se	LLCI	ULCI
SLP → PI → BL	.12	.02	.0887	.1526
T → PI → BL	.12	.02	.0892	.1605
SWL → PI → BL	.04	.01	.0230	.0561
DFL → PI → BL	.00	.01	-.0141	.0142

brand love (H6), which is in line with the findings of previous studies (e.g., Bianchi and Mortimer, 2015; Birch et al., 2018). This indicates that consumers motivated to support the local farmers, producers, and economy by buying local produce would have high intentions to consume and buy more of their products through the underlying distribution system. Such intention to support local farmers, producers, and the economy would also cause the consumers to develop a passionate and emotional attachment with these food products sold. Similarly, transparency is positively associated with purchase intentions (H7) and brand love (H8), which concurs with prior studies (e.g., Devaney, 2016; Peschel and Aschemann-Witzel, 2020). These findings imply that clarity about the origin and content of the local produce being sold positively influences the intent of the consumers to buy and consume more local produce through the distribution system. Such transparency also causes consumers to develop a love and passion for the local food products thus being sold. In addition, the findings revealed a positive association between satisfaction with labeling and purchase intentions (H9) and brand love (H10). This is in line with the extant literature (e.g., Aitken et al., 2020; Velardi and Selfa, 2020), indicating that clear labeling about food being locally produced makes it easy to identify local food products and becomes a source of labeling satisfaction for consumers. In turn, this enhances both the consumers' future purchase intentions and brand love for the local food sold by the distribution system.

In comparison, statistical analyses revealed a non-significant association between the desire for labeling and purchase intentions (H11), implying that the local food consumers' desire to know more about the health, ethical, and environmental impact of the local produce sold through the distribution system does not increase their purchase intentions. A possible explanation for this non-significant finding could be that consumers desire the labeling to be appropriate for information purposes only, which aids in the process of buying but does not indicate buying intentions. However, the results confirmed a positive association between the desire for labeling and brand love (H12), in agreement with prior findings (e.g., Aitken et al., 2020; Messer et al., 2017), which suggests that the expected labeling on local food products sold through the distribution system can help consumers develop an emotional bond with these products.

6.3. Purchase intentions and brand love

We examined the mediation effect of purchase intentions on the association between the variables representing organism, i.e., supporting local farmers, transparency, satisfaction, and desire for labeling and brand love through RQ2. First, we tested and confirmed a positive association between purchase intentions and brand love (H13), in concordance with previous studies (e.g., Nikhashemi et al., 2019). This outcome is quite plausible since purchase intentions are closely associated with the actual purchase, which can evoke positive emotions about local food products upon consumption and lead to an increase in brand love. The findings also confirmed the mediating role of purchase intentions for all of the hypothesized relationships except for the association of desire for labeling with brand love. Thus, H14 a-c were supported. Previous studies have also confirmed the mediating role of purchase intentions in the association of antecedents with actual behavior (e.g., Aitken et al., 2020; Panda et al., 2019; Nikhashemi et al., 2019), which supports the important role of purchase intentions in developing brand love among consumers of local food.

7. Study implications

7.1. Theoretical implications

The study has four major theoretical implications. To begin with, it is the first to investigate a social media channel in the context of local food delivery and consumption. Although previous studies have explored other channels, such as retail outlets and box schemes (Hashem et al.,

2018), no prior studies have yet explored local food distribution through social media platforms, such as Facebook. Therefore, the study significantly contributes to the literature on local food distribution systems (e.g., Devaney, 2016; O'Hara and Lin, 2020). The contribution of the study in initiating research related to consumer behavior toward social media-driven local food delivery becomes even more significant in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has disrupted retail buying through traditional channels. The social distancing norms introduced to control the spread of the pandemic can be more effective through a supply chain supported by social media, where producers and buyers can connect directly to coordinate the ordering and delivery details.

Second, the study explores the antecedents of brand love in the context of local food consumption. By revealing the association of local food-related variables and purchase intentions with brand love, the study brings forth hitherto under-explored associations. Enhanced understanding of brand love is critical as it is linked to brand loyalty and word-of-mouth (Carroll and Ahuvia 2006), which have been explored as key variables in multiple contexts. The study ultimately adds to the existing understanding of brand love (e.g., Bagozzi et al., 2017; Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006; Mody and Hanks, 2020) and altruism (Panda et al., 2020; Song and Kim, 2019) in the context of local food, thereby creating a platform for more research on how local food producers can better engage with consumers by crafting a positive image for themselves in consumers' minds. Third, the study yields revelatory insights about the consumer decision-making process in the context of local food consumption. By conceptualizing how consumers may be influenced by the greater good, the study contributes toward an improved understanding of local food preference. On the one hand, the study brings forth how the internal states of individuals are affected by consumers' altruistic concerns, and on the other hand, reveals how these internal states increase purchase intentions and brand love. The study thus underscores the complex nature of consumer decision-making in the case of ethical and sustainable consumption, thereby paving the way for future insights for local food producers and marketers. Furthermore, the study provides a greater understanding of local food preferences by proposing and confirming the positive mediating role of purchase intentions in increasing brand love. This is a new dimension that the study proposes, which opens the way for better understanding the association between the two key behavioral aspects of consumers in the context of local food. In sum, the study enriches the literature of local food consumption (e.g., Jensen et al., 2019; Zhang et al., 2020) and preferences (e.g., Feldmann and Hamm, 2015; Korhonen et al., 2017), an area that can be expected to gain commercial prominence with rising consumer awareness.

Lastly, the study advances the understanding and applicability of SOR theory and literature (e.g., Fu et al., 2020; Kumar et al., 2021) in three ways: (a) by extending it to the context of local food distributed through an online social media channel, (b) by showcasing its versatility in conceptualizing a wide range of internal and external considerations that influence consumers' response to a product or service, and (c) by spotlighting how the SOR framework may be used to propose not only direct associations but also explore the possible mediating role of key behavioral manifestations to better explicate consumer behavior.

7.2. Practical implications

The findings offer three key practical implications for managers, consumers, and producers of local food. First, by revealing the significant impact of altruism on support for local producers, satisfaction, and desire for labeling, the study recommends that to attract the attention of such altruistic consumers, local food producers should place appealing, informative, and appropriate labels on their products. It is also important to note that consumers desire labels that give health-related information about the food, as well as indicate the ethical and environmental implications of the food sold through the distribution system. Thus, producers should ensure that all products are labeled properly with such information and clearly highlight the local origin of the food. To further

underscore this local connection, the label can be designed by incorporating some words in the local language or a local map.

Second, by illustrating the important role of support for local producers, transparency, and satisfaction with labeling on purchase intentions, the study suggests that managers of online channels should focus more on establishing a transparent system, ensuring appropriate product labeling, and emphasizing support for local producers. Establishing a transparent system can be achieved by facilitating the meeting of producers and consumers without any involvement by the online channel managers. Channel managers should also ensure that all products sold through such channels bear labels, as these boost the confidence of consumers and their likelihood of buying the products. Furthermore, managers should focus on acknowledging the support given to local producers by the consumers, which may be achieved by including a thank you note from local producers in the product labeling or allowing local farmers to meet the consumers to showcase how their purchases have helped and encouraged them.

Third, by revealing the significant role of supporting local producers, transparency, satisfaction and desire for labeling, and purchase intentions on brand love, the study recommends that managers and producers focus on establishing local food as a brand, driven by the underlying distribution system. This can be achieved by supporting local farmers, incorporating appropriate product labeling, promoting transparency, and motivating consumers to buy local food. Moreover, purchase intentions can be achieved through appropriate communication on online channels such as Facebook posts indicating how consumers' decision to buy local food is changing the lives of local farmers by enabling them to produce more local food. As previously mentioned, arranging online or offline meetings of suppliers and producers can increase a sense of connection between local farmers and consumers, leading to more support and transparency and further boosting the brand love for local food and the underlying distribution system.

8. Conclusion

The study aimed to investigate the local food purchase behavior among group members of REKO, a social media-based local food distribution system, in Finland. We adopted stimuli-organism-response theory as a theoretical foundation to investigate the consumption phenomena of local food. The study conceptualized a complex research model in which altruism acts as a stimulus, supporting local farmers, transparency, satisfaction with labeling, and desire for labeling represent the internal state of consumers (organism), and purchase intentions and brand love act as responses. Specifically, the study examined the association of a stimulus (altruism) on the organism (i.e., supporting local farmers, transparency, satisfaction with labeling, and desire for labeling) as well as the association of the organism with purchase intentions and brand love. In addition, the mediating role of purchase intentions in reinforcing brand love was also examined. The findings revealed the important role of altruism in generating both a positive and negative internal state among consumers. However, supporting local farmers, transparency, satisfaction with labeling, and desire for labeling support the purchase intention and brand love of local food. The study also confirmed the mediating role of purchase intention. Accordingly, the findings contribute to the literature on local food, extend the SOR framework, and add to the knowledge body of brand love. Finally, the study presented multiple practical implications for distribution system managers, consumers, and local food producers.

8.1. Limitation and future studies

Despite its notable contributions, the study has three major limitations. First, the study collected data from Finnish-speaking REKO group members, which limits the generalization to other groups. For example, there exist Swedish-speaking REKO groups in Finland as well as groups in other Scandinavian countries. Future studies may incorporate this

limitation by collecting extensive data from representative groups from multiple countries and performing a comparative study. This kind of future study may offer insights into whether the resource allocation for marketing strategies should be repositioned based on regional location and how these marketing efforts should be developed.

Second, the study only collected data from REKO group members. Thus, the findings are less applicable to other sales and distribution systems of local food, such as Eggspress, Helsinki food hub, or Lähiapaja. Future studies may incorporate this limitation by performing a replication study among other local food distribution channels, which may offer more insights on customer segmentation, positioning, and targeting by optimizing resources.

Lastly, the research design of this study is cross-sectional, which may limit the understanding of a temporal aspect of purchase intentions and brand love. Moreover, the data was collected in May 2020, i.e., during the COVID-19 pandemic, which has altered the consumption pattern of consumers. Future studies may incorporate this limitation by adopting a longitudinal research design, which can offer a more valid limit for temporal consumption behavior. Future studies may also supplement this study by conducting the study from the producer's viewpoint.

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