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## Impact of Québec Agrotour Participation on Local Food Purchasing

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## **Impact of Québec Agrotour Participation On Local Food Purchasing**

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### **Abstract**

Agrotourism is the practice of visiting farms or other agricultural settings for recreation and/or education. It is widely understood that agrotourism is a positive benefactor for local farms and the economy, but little has been studied about the impact of agrotour participation on consumer behaviour. The aim of this preliminary analysis was to explore the impact of agrotour participation on attitudes, perceived behavioural control, personal norms, and intentions towards purchasing local foods.

Participants who registered for an agrotour at Traktour (Montréal, QC) between March and July 2023 were invited to complete an online survey the week before, and two weeks following the tour. Paired t-tests compared results from the surveys before and after the agrotour. Pearson's correlation coefficient was utilized to explore associations. This study was approved by the McGill University REB #23-03-029.

Of 61 participants emailed, 48 (79%) responded to the pre- and 34 (56%) to the post-agrotour survey. Participants had a mean age of 47 years (SD 17), with 28 (58%) having a bachelor's degree education or higher and 36 (75%) reporting an annual household income of \$50,000 or greater. There were no statistically significant changes in attitudes, perceived behavioural control, personal norms, or intentions regarding purchasing local foods. Perceived behavioural control and personal norms were positively correlated with intentions to purchase local foods, but attitudes were not. Thirty participants (88%) reported the agrotour made them more conscious

about where their food comes from and in the two weeks following the tour, 25 (74%) participants reported purchasing local foods.

This is the first study to explore consumer demographics and the impact of an agrotour in Québec on consumer attitudes towards purchasing local foods. Future efforts should utilize objective measures of local food purchasing and aim to target perceived behavioural control and personal norms to increase local food purchasing.

**Keywords:** agrotourism, farming, consumer behaviour, local food, purchasing behaviour

## **Impact de la participation québécoise à l'agrotourisme sur l'achat de produits alimentaires locaux**

### **Résumé**

L'agrotourisme est la pratique consistant à visiter des fermes ou d'autres établissements agricoles à des fins récréatives et/ou éducatives. Il est largement admis que l'agrotourisme est bénéfique pour les exploitations agricoles et l'économie locales, mais peu d'études ont été menées sur l'impact de la participation à l'agrotourisme sur le comportement des consommateurs. Le but de cette analyse préliminaire était d'explorer l'impact de la participation à l'agrotourisme sur les attitudes, le contrôle comportemental perçu, les normes personnelles et les intentions d'achat d'aliments locaux.

Les participants qui se sont inscrits à un agrotour à Traktour (Montréal, QC) entre mars et juillet 2023 ont été invités à répondre à un sondage en ligne la semaine précédant et deux semaines après la visite. Des tests t appariés ont comparé les résultats des enquêtes avant et après l'agrotour. Le coefficient de corrélation de Pearson a été utilisé pour explorer les associations. Cette étude a été approuvée par le CER de l'Université de McGill #23-03-029.

Sur les 61 participants à qui un courrier électronique a été envoyé, 48 (79 %) ont répondu à l'enquête préalable et 34 (56 %) à l'enquête post-agrotourisme. Les participants avaient un âge moyen de 47 ans (DS 17), 28 (58 %) ayant un baccalauréat ou plus et 36 (75 %) déclarant un revenu familial annuel de 50 000 \$ ou plus. Il n'y a eu aucun changement statistiquement significatif dans les attitudes, le contrôle comportemental perçu, les normes personnelles ou les intentions concernant l'achat d'aliments locaux. Le contrôle comportemental perçu et les normes personnelles étaient positivement corrélés aux intentions d'acheter des aliments locaux, mais pas aux attitudes. Trente participants (88 %) ont déclaré que l'agrotour les avait rendus plus conscients de l'origine de leur nourriture et dans les deux semaines suivant la visite, 25 (74 %) participants ont déclaré avoir acheté des aliments locaux.

Il s'agit de la première étude à explorer les données démographiques des consommateurs et l'impact d'un agrotourisme au Québec sur les attitudes des consommateurs à l'égard de l'achat d'aliments locaux. Les efforts futurs devraient utiliser des mesures objectives de l'achat de produits alimentaires locaux et viser à cibler le contrôle comportemental perçu et les normes personnelles afin d'augmenter les achats de produits alimentaires locaux.

**Mots clés :** agrotourisme, agriculture, comportement du consommateur, alimentation locale, comportement d'achat.

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## 1.0 Introduction and Scholarly Context

Agricultural intensification, defined as the growth in production of food using modern techniques and technologies, has caused significant disconnect between producers and consumers (Reid et al., 2012). This is due to several factors including the establishment of large agribusinesses dominating food production, the globalization of food trade, and exponential societal expansion, which has withdrawn consumers from direct contact with food production (Bonti-Ankomah et al., 2017; Rotz & Fraser, 2015). As a result, consumers are often unaware of the conditions under which their food is produced and the impact it has on the environment, local communities, and the workers involved (Charlebois et al., 2020; Moubarac et al., 2014). This disconnect has led to increased interest in alternative food networks, such as local and organic food systems, which offer a more direct connection between producers and consumers (Angowski & Jarosz-Angowska, 2019; Connolly et al., 2022; Kajzer Mitchell et al., 2017).

Agrotourism, the practice of visiting farms or other agricultural settings for recreational or educational purposes, has been on the rise in recent years (Gil Arroyo et al., 2013). The Association de L'Agrotourisme et du Tourisme Gourmand du Québec classifies agrotourism into five categories: (a) visiting a producer–farmer, (b) eating local foods, (c) participating in activities, (d) watching immersive experiences, and (e) buying local products (Association de l'agrotourisme et du tourisme gourmand du Québec, 2023). These different experiences teach visitors about agricultural production methods, food processing, and sales, in an interactive and enjoyable way (Xingping, 2019).

Agrotourism is a positive benefactor for local producers, the local economy, and for promoting sustainable food practices and environments. It is estimated that in 2022 alone, Québec garnered \$798 million in revenue from agrotourism and food tourism (Association de l'agrotourisme et du tourisme gourmand du Québec, 2023). Agrotourism benefits extend beyond economics, by placing emphasis on making use of natural resources and the surrounding landscape. Agrotour experiences leave visitors feeling more connected to their environment and thus can influence attitudes and intentions regarding food purchasing behaviour (Brune et al., 2021). By allowing visitors to connect with the land and understand where their food comes from, it can also raise awareness about the importance of supporting local agriculture and promote sustainable food practices (Brune et al., 2021). In fact, participating in agrotourism in childhood is associated with positive beliefs about services rendered by farms and farmers in adulthood (Barbieri et al., 2019). Agrotourism has the potential to influence consumer behavior by educating visitors about the benefits of locally sourced, sustainable food and encouraging them to seek out these types of

products when they return home. More specifically, consumer intentions are often impacted by attitudes, perceived behavioural control, and norms—subjective and personal—all components of the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB; Ajzen, 1991). As such, this theory is one of the most influential and widely applied theories to describe the consumer behaviour of tourists (Brune et al., 2021). Food literacy and food skills can also be improved through agrotour participation, supporting consumers in making more informed purchase decisions and healthy choices.

Local foods are those consumed a short distance from where they are produced (Canadian Food Inspection Agency, n.d.). This includes foods grown at home (e.g., in a garden) or purchased directly from farms or farmers markets. Thus, agrotourism has the potential to increase local food purchasing behaviour, by exposing individuals to local food producers and production methods. In fact, Lanou et al. (2021) reported that agrotour participants in North Carolina (USA) increased purchasing of local products after experiential food education. After attending one or more agriculture-related events, a greater proportion of participants in this study reported using food labels and looking for logos indicating locally grown products when purchasing food. Further, there was a reported increase in participants shopping at local stores and purchasing local products, with the greatest increase seen among participants who did not report these purchasing behaviours prior to experiential education (Lanou et al., 2021).

Another study from North Carolina aimed to measure the impact of agrotourism experiences on consumer intentions to purchase local foods (Brune et al., 2021). The authors surveyed 328 adults before and after visiting a U-pick farm, with a questionnaire based on the TPB. The results showed only a slight statistical change, as even before the agrotour, participants already had strong positive attitudes towards local foods (Brune et al., 2021). This is a reoccurring limitation within agrotourism research; as agrotour experiences are voluntary and typically cost money to participate in, they attract individuals who already have interest in agriculture and local food production.

In Québec specifically, there has not yet been an evaluation of agrotourism participation on consumer purchasing of local food. In a report from the Association de L'Agrotourisme et du Tourisme Gourmand du Québec, the main motivations for consuming local products were reported to be (a) quality, (b) supporting local producers and regional vitality, and (c) feeling like a responsible consumer (Association de l'agrotourisme et du tourisme gourmand du Québec, 2018). However, the main barriers to consuming local products were travel to the site of purchase, price, and lack of time (Association de l'agrotourisme et du tourisme gourmand du Québec, 2018).

Despite widespread acknowledgement regarding the economic advantages of agritourism, research in this field remains scarce. Given the limited evidence regarding the relationship between agrotourism experiences and changes in local purchasing behavior, the purpose of this preliminary analysis, due to a small sample size, was to understand the demographic characteristics of participants on a Québec agrotour and explore intentions towards purchasing local foods using a TPB lens. In addition, we aimed to explore whether components of the TPB are changed after participating in an agrotour.

## **2.0 Methodology**

### **2.1 Study Setting**

All participants included in this study participated in an agrotour with Traktour. While Traktour offers a variety of agrotours, the format of said tours is identical. Participants tour three different agricultural settings—mostly small farms—within the same region over the course of half a day. Participants must organize their own transport to and from each destination. At each stop, participants are provided with an organized tour of the facilities, the opportunity to interact with the animals (if applicable), and a chance to sample the products—such as fresh vegetables or fruits. Participants also have the opportunity to purchase products from the farm at the end of the tour. Most tours are led by the owners of the destination, with at least one Traktour employee present to direct participants between the three stops. Tours are seasonal, with primarily outdoor destinations in the summer months, and indoor ones in the winter. An example of a summer tour includes (a) a geese farm; (b) a hydroponic vegetable farm; and (c) a farm with a sea buckthorn orchard, chickens, and rabbits. In contrast, a winter tour may include a local brewery, a coffee bean roastery, and a chocolate factory.

### **2.2 Study Design**

This study was a pre-/post- survey analysis assessing the impact of a Québec agrotour on consumer attitudes and intentions towards local food purchasing. Participants registered for an agrotour experience with Traktour (Montréal, QC) between March and July 2023 were included. Participation was voluntary, and those who responded to the survey were entered in a draw to win a gift basket of local products. Pre-tour surveys were sent to participants who had registered for an agrotour via email the week before the tour, while post-tour surveys were sent two weeks after the tour.

Surveys were completed anonymously online and contained demographic questions, as well as 5-point Likert scale questions regarding attitudes, perceived behavioural control, personal norms, and intentions towards purchasing local foods. The structure of the questionnaire was designed based on the TPB, with questions addressing each of the following categories: attitudes (three questions), behavioural control (three questions), personal norms (two questions), and intentions (four questions). Attitudes, behavioural control, and personal norms utilized a 5-point Likert scale of strongly disagree to strongly agree, while intention questions used a 5-point Likert scale ranging from very unlikely to very likely. The mean—standard deviation (SD)—was then calculated for each TPB category (e.g., attitudes) pre- and post-tour. The questions were adapted from a questionnaire used in a previous study, with the primary focus being intention to purchase local foods (Brune et al., 2021). There was a focus on personal norms—instead of subjective norms—in this questionnaire since it has been proposed that personal norms are in fact a primary component of the TPB in certain contexts. As discussed by Brune et al. (2021), researchers have proposed extending TPB to include personal norms when predicting environmentally friendly intended behavior, and declared it is useful to add personal norms for determining pro-environmental purchasing behaviours (Chen & Tung, 2014; Onel, 2017). Lastly, as one goal for this preliminary study was to accrue a high participant response rate, we aimed to keep the questions at a minimum. The questionnaire was

reviewed by Traktour employees and a working group before the study commenced. The study was approved by the Research Ethics Board of McGill University, Montréal, Québec, Canada (REB# 23-03-029).

### 2.3 Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics were assessed for normality using the Shapiro-Wilk test and are presented as means (SD) or frequencies (percentages). A paired t-test was used to compare results between the pre- and post-tour surveys. Pearson's correlation coefficient was utilized to explore associations. The statistical analysis was performed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences software (SPSS v.27, IBM, Armonk NY, USA) and significance was set at  $p < 0.05$ . As a preliminary analysis, the sample size of  $n=34$  was determined to explore changes in attitudes, perceived behavioural control, personal norms, and intentions towards local food purchasing but was not sufficient to reach statistical power.

### 3.0 Analysis

Between March and July 2023, emails were sent to 61 participants, one week before and two weeks after Traktour participation. Forty-eight (79%) and 34 (56%) participants responded to the survey pre- and post-tour, respectively. Participants had a mean age of 47 years (SD 17), with the majority having a bachelor's degree education or higher and reporting an annual household income of \$50,000 or greater (see Table 1). Most participants who responded to the survey were the primary grocery shopper within their household.

Table 1. *Demographic Characteristics of Participants*

Variable	n=48
Age (years) (n=41)	47 (17)
Québec resident (n (%))	45 (94)
Place of residence (n (%))	
Rural area	1 (2)
Small town or village	10 (21)
Suburb	17 (35)
Large city	20 (42)
Education level (n (%))	
Secondary school or less	9 (19)
CEGEP <sup>a</sup>	11 (23)

**Table 1 continued**

Bachelor’s degree	16 (33)
Post-secondary diploma	12 (25)
Annual household income (n (%))	
<\$25,000	4 (8)
\$25,000-50,000	8 (17)
\$50,000-100,000	22 (46)
\$100,000-150,000	10 (21)
>\$150,000	4 (8)
Primary grocery shopper (n (%))	39 (81)
Brought kids on tour (n (%))	5 (10)

*Note:* Data presented as mean (SD), unless otherwise stated. <sup>a</sup>College of General and Professional Teaching.

There were no statistically significant changes in attitudes, perceived behavioural control, personal norms, or intentions towards purchasing local foods (see Table 2). In terms of the changes for each individual question, there was a trend towards significance for individuals feeling responsible to know local farmers ( $p=0.066$ ).

**Table 2. Change in Attitudes, Perceived Behavioural Control, Personal Norms, and Intentions Before and After an Agrotour Experience (paired *t*-test;  $n=34$ )**

Variable	Pre	Post	p value
Attitudes toward buying local foods	4.32 (0.48)	4.34 (0.37)	0.871
Perceived behavioural control	4.06 (0.76)	4.11 (0.57)	0.682
Personal norms	4.26 (0.68)	4.21 (0.60)	0.743
Intentions towards buying local foods	4.32 (0.77)	4.34 (0.53)	0.867

*Note:* Data presented as mean (SD). Significance set at  $p<0.05$ .

Correlations between the means of TPB components pre- and post-tour are presented in Table 3. Pre- and post-tour perceived behavioural control and personal norms were positively correlated with intentions to purchase local foods, however, attitudes were not (see Table 3).



Table 3. Pearson Correlations Between Variables Organized According to the TPB Pre- (n=48) and Post-tour (n=34)

Variable	Attitudes (pre)	Attitudes (post)	Behavioural control (pre)	Behavioural control (post)	Personal norms (pre)	Personal norms (post)	Intentions (pre)
Attitudes (post)	-0.19						
Behavioural control (pre)	0.08	0.00					
Behavioural control (post)	-0.37*	0.48**	0.19				
Personal norms (pre)	0.24	-0.23	0.40**	-0.29			
Personal norms (post)	-0.28	0.44**	-0.12	0.45**	-0.41*		
Intentions (pre)	0.15	0.13	0.71**	0.02	0.62**	-0.05	
Intentions (post)	-0.10	0.16	-0.08	0.42*	-0.23	0.42*	0.11

\*Correlations significant at p<0.05. \*\*Correlations significant at p<0.001.

## **4.0 Recommendations**

This study is the first to our knowledge to assess the purchasing intentions of participants on a Québec agrotour towards local foods. This exploratory analysis furthers our understanding of agrotourist characteristics and areas to focus future research. A strength of this work is the study design of pre- and post-tour surveys being administered three weeks apart. While there was no difference found in local food purchasing intentions, assessing sustained behaviour change post-tour—versus immediate change—is more representative of the long-term impact of agrotour participation. While there were no significant changes identified in attitudes, perceived behavioural control, personal norms, or intentions towards purchasing local foods post-agrotour, most participants had positive attitudes before the tour as shown in Table 2, a result consistent with Brune et al. (2021). This is likely because agrotours often attract individuals who are already interested in and purchase local products. It is worth mentioning however, that responsibility for knowing local farmers trended toward statistical significance ( $p=0.066$ ). This suggests the intimate and direct contact with local farmers experienced during an agrotour positively influences feelings of responsibility towards local producers. As such, future studies should consider incorporating objective measures of connection with local farmers to assess how this feeling of responsibility translates into actions.

Although attitudes are the component of the TPB most often associated with intentions, the results in the present study suggest otherwise. Perceived behavioural control and personal norms were both positively correlated with intentions to purchase local foods pre- and post-tour, while attitudes were not (see Table 3). This may be partially explained by the fact that the questions utilized for perceived behavioural control, personal norms, and intentions were asked in the first person, leading participants to answer more similarly than the broad questions used for attitudes (e.g., eating local foods is good for the environment). There were also more positive and less variable responses to questions regarding attitudes compared to the other categories, potentially leading to lack of statistical significance.

These findings suggest that agrotour companies should focus on improving perceived behavioural control and personal norms in relation to local food purchasing to best increase local food purchasing intentions. With agrotours demonstrating that local foods are easy to find and purchase, perceived behavioural control may be improved. Interactive cooking demonstrations and giving participants recipes incorporating local foods would also be another strategy to assist agrotourists in increasing perceived behavioural control. In addition, it has been shown that stronger personal norms result in more pro-environmental dietary behaviours regardless of social norms, reiterating the importance of agrotours focusing on personal norm improvement (de Groot et al., 2021). Allowing agrotour participants one-on-one opportunities to speak with local farmers during the tour could be suggested as a strategy to focus on personal norms. It is also possible that with modification of the question wording and a larger sample size, attitudes would also be correlated with intentions.

While the demographic characteristics of the agrotourists in this study are consistent with others (Brune et al., 2021; Travel Oregon, n.d.), a reoccurring limitation in agrotourism research is the inherent biases of these participants. On average, agrotourists live 35 km from the farms they visit (Turnipseed, 2022). Thus, it is likely these individuals own a car, are comfortable driving far distances on highways, have large blocks of free time—often on weekends—and a surplus of

income to spend on gas. In addition to gas costs, organized agrotours typically have a ticket price of at least \$25 to participate (tours at Traktour range from \$35–45). Participants are then often shown local products for purchase at each farm stop, encouraging greater spending. In Québec, the average amount spent by consumers on a single agrotour or food experience is \$57 (Association de l'agrotourisme et du tourisme gourmand du Québec, 2023). In fact, in this study, all but one of the participants reported purchasing local products during their agrotour. These factors influence the niche agrotour clientele who have interest, time, and income to spare. Indeed, as seen in the present study and among others, most farm visitors are older adults, highly educated—bachelor's degree or higher—and have a reported income of more than \$40,000–50,000 (Che et al., 2006; Turnipseed, 2022).

While strategies for outreach to attract a more diverse demographic of agrotourists are explored, other limitations of the present study will be addressed in future analyses. Firstly, the sample size allowed for exploration in this preliminary analysis but did not allow for sufficient statistical power to detect changes in consumer intentions pre- and post-agrotour. Second, there were important demographic characteristics of the participants which were not assessed, such as sex, race, and occupation. Collecting this simple information in future versions of the survey will allow for a more comprehensive profile of Québec agrotourists, to determine which populations remain underrepresented. In addition, there was no documentation of whether participants were first time or regular agrotourists, which may have contributed to the lack of significant results. Third, the survey was only sent to email addresses that had registered for an agrotour with Traktour. This means that if one individual registered four participants for the tour, only that one individual directly received the link to the surveys. Including a space for all participants to enter their email addresses when registering for the agrotour would be a way to mitigate this and greatly increase the sample size. Lastly, long-term follow-up and objective assessment of local food purchasing would be beneficial in future versions of this study to fully understand the relationship between agrotourism and local food purchasing, as little objective information exists illustrating this link.

## **5.0 Conclusion**

This study provides novel insight into the demographic characteristics of Québec agrotourists and their intentions towards purchasing local foods. Information supporting agrotourism experiences positively influencing perceived behavioural control and personal norms may help improve local food purchasing intentions. As such, the Canadian agrotourism industry may expand and attract a more diverse demographic of participants. Furthermore, by performing this preliminary analysis, limitations of the surveys utilized in this study have been identified such that alterations can be made. For example, more demographic questions will be added to the survey, participants will be asked about past agrotourism participation, and the registration algorithm will be adjusted such that all participants in a group will have access to the survey. As such, a future analysis is planned with an adjusted survey and larger sample size. Overall, the high response rate to this study supports the feasibility of a larger scale analysis assessing the attitudes and intentions of Québec agrotourists towards local food purchasing.

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