

TRANSPORT FINDINGS

The Lifestyle and Mobility Connection of Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) Users

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Findings

Because Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) is considered a greener food shopping option, we hypothesized that users would adopt other sustainability-oriented behaviors. We sought, through 16 qualitative interviews with users, to understand whether CSA use in Montreal, Canada was accompanied by more ecological, non-motorized travel behavior. We find that urban users are typically able to subscribe to a nearby drop-off point and that many of them use non-motorized modes to access their weekly baskets. However, because of the weight of large produce baskets and the set time periods for collection, basket pick-ups by new Covid-19 era users are often part of car-based trip chains.

1. QUESTIONS: THE CSA LIFESTYLE AND SUSTAINABLE MOBILITY LINK

Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) shares risks inherent to each harvest by directly connecting farmers and customers through a subscription to a weekly/monthly basket of seasonal produce delivered to the consumer via drop-off points. CSA has become an increasingly popular alternative to conventional large-surface bulk purchase grocery shopping (often in a car) or to multiple frequent trips to various specialty stores (often by active modes). Life-course events, like relocation, changes in employment or the Covid-19 pandemic, can drive changes in consumption patterns (Plessz et al. 2016). Covid-19 coincided with a 45% increase in CSA users in Québec and with similar increases in Northern US (Chiche and Lachapelle 2021).

Shopping for groceries is a frequently repeated non-discretionary behavior that is often an important reason for owning a car (Jiao, Moudon, and Drewnowski 2011). The proximity to food outlets can also influence the mode of transport individuals' use to access food. Transforming access to food can thus be an important component in enabling sustainable lifestyles. However, contrary to grocery stores, CSA drop-off points are only available for a few hours at a time each week. No research to date documents the travel behavior related to time-constrained CSA basket pickups.

In this project, we sought to understand how consumers adapt to CSA and integrate pickups to daily life and travel routines. We hypothesized that urban CSA users, to be consistent with their environmental beliefs and desire for locally grown organic products, would be more likely to use non-motorized transport to get to drop-off points.

2. METHODS

During the summer of 2021, in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, we interviewed 16 members of Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) to understand their characteristics, how they started using CSA, how it transformed their lifestyles and consumption patterns and how it influenced their resulting travel patterns. We focus in this article on the aspects related to personal mobility. Participants were recruited through drop-off point site visits, and via the network of CSA farmers' Facebook page. Most participants lived on the Island of Montréal, except for one living in a more distant suburb. Montréal residents lived in neighborhoods of different levels of centrality and population density. Nearly a hundred delivery points are located on the island of Montréal (Chiche and Lachapelle 2021), thus likely rarely making CSA closer than existing food shopping alternatives. The project received approval from the institution's ethics committee (#4393).

3. FINDINGS

First, our interviews confirmed many results of published studies, namely that CSA users are typically younger families, with medium to high income, and that they are motivated by ecological sentiments or desire to buy local, organic foods (Nahas 2023).

We also found that users of CSA systematically need to complement their fresh produce baskets with dry goods, condiments, and other food products. Based on the comments made on modes of transport used for CSA basket pick-ups and for other grocery shopping, as well as distance to drop-off point and types of stores used to complement CSA, users can be categorized into four groups.

Categories of CSA users

MOTORIZED ENVIRONMENTALISTS (N=2)

Users of lower density neighborhoods and suburbs declare wanting to adopt an ecological lifestyle and eat local organic produce but for economic, household size, or other life-course events, have decided to locate in less accessible neighborhoods. Cars are considered "a necessary evil" that enables them to access farther CSA baskets and specialized stores more easily. For one participant, CSA made suburban living possible and helped recreate her previous urban lifestyle of shopping in farmers' markets.

NEIGHBORHOOD EPICUREANS (N=8)

The largest group in our sample likely represents the lifestyle of much of Montreal's CSA users. Along with environmental awareness, this group is defined by the desire to live, work and shop near their homes, and take advantage of dense neighborhood amenities including farmers' markets and specialty food stores. This use of a wide variety of establishments requires an important time investment. These participants are mostly able to avoid

driving by shopping almost exclusively in their neighborhood. “I have a huge backpack” mentions one participant on the topic of bulky and heavy CSA baskets.

NEW COVID-19 MOTORIZED USERS (N=3)

A smaller group of respondents explained how the Covid-19 pandemic served as a gateway opportunity for their new practice. Moving from thinking about rationalizing grocery shopping to avoid exposure to Covid-19, to a broader discussion on healthy food habits raised the idea of CSA for a respondent. Working from home and a clear knowledge that the summer vacation would be spent at home created predictability, the appropriate conditions for a yearly CSA subscription. One participant even mentioned: “...having a hard time seeing how CSA could work when working from an office”. This contrast with long-standing users that claim they frequently make pick-ups on the way home from work. The contrast with other urban users is also made evident by the frequent use of motorized modes. While the Covid-19 pandemic enabled some households to discover CSA services, a return to previous habits may follow the end of the pandemic.

ACTIVE SHORT-DISTANCE TRAVELERS (N=3)

For some, dense neighborhood living, systematic active travel use, and proximity shopping supersede an attachment to organic or local foods. CSA use replaced conventional grocery shopping and was chosen for its great proximity above all. CSA initiated participants to organic eating and better home cooking. Using mobile caddies, bike panniers and requesting help from their children are reported strategies that help overcome the weight of CSA baskets.

Conclusion

Can CSA help households reduce their trip making, distance travelled or even car ownership? Can it fill the void in access to fresh food option in someone's neighborhoods? CSA use does not entirely substitute other shopping, as baskets need to be completed with other purchases. As such, it is unlikely to help reduce food shopping trips. It can however reduce trip related to eating out, for fear of wasting the constant inflow of produce. Even though the desire for proximity and ecological living are central to most users, 6/16 participants report that the car is still favored for pick-ups because of the weight of products and the option to use the vehicle as storage.

CSA also does not necessarily imply improved accessibility to food as drop-off points are distributed somewhat randomly across city spaces and not targeted towards so-called food deserts, places where food is too distant to be easily accessed unless you drive.

Previous systems approach to CSA question the economies of scale lost to multiple farmers delivering to a city (Mundler and Rumpus 2012). No studies have looked at the consumer side of travel impacts. This paper suggests CSA does not necessarily easily fit with active travel, especially when it come to new waves of users brought by the pandemic. But an important use of active travel for pick-ups does reflect the environmental motivations of most users in our sample.

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