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Article

The Role of Businesses Within Alternative Food Networks in Renegotiating the Cultural Norms and Values Associated with Food

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Abstract

Alternative food networks (AFNs) are differentiated from conventional food systems by the strength of consumer connection with the food itself and the food businesses that grow, harvest and sell the food. Actors within AFNs include micro-, small- and medium-sized businesses (MSMEs) and it is the businesses themselves and their modus operandi at the business–consumer interface that are the focus of this work. Using two stages of semi-structured interviews, 39 in total, conducted in Greece and the UK in 2022–2023, the aim of this study was to explore respondents' perceptions of the role and influence of MSMEs within AFNs in creating consumer food-related values and promoting higher levels of engagement with the food itself. The 5Cs typology emerged from the thematic analysis of the interviews. The businesses demonstrated commitment to specific values, had a contextual role in changing wider food system behaviors, and facilitated the continuance of pre-existing high food-related values, providing foci for these consumers. Where consumer food-related values were lower, businesses recalibrated via discussion and education and (re)connected consumers with food, producers and knowledge. In contrast to conventional food supply chains, these businesses and their direct relationship with customers meant the cultural norms and values associated with the foods were continually negotiated, legitimized and operationalized then renegotiated when needed.

Keywords: alternative food networks; connection; continuance; recalibration; commitment; context; food-related values; food businesses; consumers

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1. Introduction

> 'Humans don't just randomly feed; we select, fashion, concoct, and make an edible assemblage that fits our imagining of food. This is an intimate relationship with an artifact, like no other; food is the only consumed cultural artifact that quite literally becomes us.' (Crowther [1] p. xviii)

The cultural significance of food is framed by socio-economic factors such as household costs and the proportion of household income spent on food; individuals reported as feeling 'time poor,' their wish for convenience, and wanting to spend less time on food preparation [2,3]. Convenience as a construct reflects elements of food provisioning that

save time, provide 'ease of preparation', and minimize the physical and mental effort required [4]. Over the last fifty years, in various Western countries, including the United Kingdom (UK), food has been repositioned from an intimate artifact to a commodity. This process has occurred through the "transformation of the products of human labor" into marketable objects that are valued in terms of their exchange value and support, i.e., "capital to be accumulated" by those who sell it ([5], p. 8). Commodification of food reshapes the relationships between individuals and the wider community, distancing people from the social connections promoted when sharing food [6]. Restructuring the food system, as explored with examples in Italy and Spain, democratizes, depoliticizes and disseminates existing capital-based power structures through practices of decommodification and revaluing of food [6,7].

One form of revaluing food is food gentrification, or 'foodification', which occurs via decommodifying food and creating niche products. Foodification activities can drive spatial development and economic growth, but by their nature the process of gentrification can be exclusionary, where only those that can afford niche products benefit [8,9]. Additionally, alternative food networks (AFNs) and the actors within them (see Barbera and Dagnes, [10]) can embody alternative approaches to commodification and industrialized modes of food supply [11,12], creating and developing new synergies [13], and reducing cognitive, organizational and physical dissonance in food systems. Relationships with food and through food are promoted through closer proximity between producers and consumers involved in direct exchange [14,15]. Alterity-related characteristics of AFNs include the distribution channel, the method of production, or the economic practices, e.g., business models based on a sharing economy [16], sometimes hybridizing and conventionalizing niche products within a wider food market [17]. The characteristics of "alterity" within an AFN are dependent on the food environment, cultural and relational contexts, locality, scale, and food materialities [18]. AFNs can exist in either the physical or the digital context or both. Previous research has focused on 'digital context' [19], the mediating role of proximity to customers [20], conviviality, connections and community building [21–23] and collectively social, environmental, spatial, ecological or economic embeddedness [18,24]. As Matacena and Corvo (2020) [5] elucidate, the true test for alterity is the ability to significantly contribute to political and cultural change via deepening meaning, education, collective organization and action and influencing public policy [10,15]. The socio-political climate of a given nation or regional culture can be a catalyst for certain forms of AFN. Indeed, the Greek Markets Without Middlemen movement, arising since austerity measures following the 2007–2008 financial crisis, forced the government to react, creating pressure higher up the supply chain, empowering others in communities to support local producers and to take control of their food system [19,20,25]. Greek consumers are reported in multiple studies to prefer a direct purchaser–seller connection where they can see the quality of the produce and how it is made, ensure the provenance, and have a personal relationship with the producer [26–32]. AFNs and local food provision have also been positioned as a way to improve food system resilience in the UK [33], as they are considered a socio-political solution to a 'broken' food system currently dominated by supermarkets [34].

Whilst alterity is operationalized within the conventional food system via 'nested' models of 'partial decommodification' 'recommodification' or alternative forms of food with additional aspects of valorization [5], the distinction between conventional retail chains and AFN models is summarized as follows:

> *"(the former being) a simultaneous combination of dis-embeddedness which destroys social bonds and habits in order to accommodate new market opportunities… and [AFN models being examples] of re-embeddedness creating new social bonds and institutions."* ([25], p. 291)

AFNs and the micro-, small- and medium-sized businesses ('MSMEs') within them can often be subject to consumer perceptions. Indeed, inconvenience, a mismatch of food-related priorities, distance to travel, underdeveloped delivery logistics [35], and the cost of fresh produce [36] are all cited as a barrier to engagement with AFNs by consumers. In response to consumer demands, businesses within AFNs often operate direct sales channels, allowing them to create a socially desirable story and identity, whilst also promoting specific sustainable and environmental values, challenging the predominant food culture by facilitating consumers to 'think differently' about food. Despite their differing positioning of non-financial values and higher levels of relational trust compared to mainstream retail supply [37], AFNs cannot fully escape market dynamics, meaning, in order to survive, the businesses may have to act at times against their original 'foundational' values [38,39]. Indeed, Zoll et al. [15] suggest that a trade-off exists for businesses between adjusting their practices to consumers' needs and maintaining the inherent 'purity' of their business values.

The segregation of the terms AFNs and MSMEs is used intentionally throughout this paper. AFNs are 'counter to mainstream centralized food provisioning, with an emphasis on proximity, transparency and community embeddedness signified through a range of initiatives, including community supported agriculture (CSA), direct sales and small-scale artisan food businesses' ([33], p. 58). Within AFNs, multiple actors are involved, such as food businesses, individuals, banking foundations, councils and universities. The subset of business enterprises that operate within AFNs in Greece and the UK is the focus of this study, and specifically, the roles of food businesses in renegotiation of food-related values and changing consumers' relationships with food. Value negotiation is not a new term. Furst et al. ([40], p. 247), focusing on the individual consumer rather than the role of businesses per se, state the following:

> *"Value negotiations weighed sensory perceptions, monetary considerations, health and nutrition beliefs and concerns, convenience, social relationships and quality of food choice decisions."*

The research highlights the role of personal ideals and the importance of managing relationships in the interplay and negotiated space between perceived value and personal values of food [40,41]. Ideals related to values and symbols can guide and give meaning to food choices, but these are situational and can be renegotiated in a given context [42]. Previous published work within this research has considered how AFNs support better understanding of food-related cultural value [23] through developing respect for food and opportunities for deeper food-related commensality, building upon theoretical work on familial and cultural grounding of respect for food, and secondly, respect for others through food and the mediating roles of trust and identity [41]. Extending this work, the aim of the current research was to explore respondents' perceptions of the role and influence of MSMEs within AFNs in creating consumer food-related values and promoting higher levels of engagement with the food itself. The two-stage research approach reported in this paper evaluates the perceptions of academics, politicians and food business owners from two countries about the role of food MSMEs within AFNs by (stage 1) for the findings to then inform empirical research with MSMEs in one country (stage 2). The contribution of this work is the development of the 5Cs conceptual typology, with the five elements being continuance, recalibration, connection, commitment, and context, which are explained and critiqued. The findings have implications for future research, policymakers and the businesses themselves.

This paper is structured as follows: Section 1 provides the conceptual grounding for this paper, and Section 2 outlines the methodology. Section 3 provides the results and analysis from the research, Section 4 provides the discussion, and Section 5 provides the conclusions and implications.

2. Materials and Methods

The aim of this exploratory research was to explore interviewees' perceptions of the role of food businesses within AFNs in renegotiating consumer cultural norms and food-related values. For this, a range of actors were purposively approached as interviewees, with food business interviews supplemented by the views of academics and politicians with expertise in the food sector. Two rounds of semi-structured interviews were conducted. The first round, conducted less than a year after the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown was lifted (n = 19), between January and March 2022, was in two locations, Fthiotida, Greece, and Gloucestershire, UK, involving food business owners, academics and politicians. First-stage purposive and convenience-based interviews were conducted in person, online via Zoom or responses sent by email. These exploratory interviews were grounded in the literature and were informal and inductive, with interviews continuing until evidence saturation was achieved, i.e., no new evidence was emerging [43–45]. The specific question the academic and politician interviewees were asked was If 'AFNs promote the renegotiation of cultural norms' (see Tzekou [46]), 'what part do food businesses play in this renegotiation in (this region)?' The business interviewee version of the question was 'How influential are food businesses in AFNs in changing the value of food or the way people view food for consumers (social, environmental, etc., value) and in social/cultural changes/lifestyles?' The lead interview questions were piloted in each country to ensure they were appropriate and capable of providing rich, detailed responses. Interview questions were adapted where appropriate for the Greek interviews, for example, where there was a challenge translating some words directly from English into Greek (see Table 1). Any change in inference was considered when analyzing the findings. The interview elicitation technique used encouraged interviewees to be reflexive rather than using a structured interview technique. Reflexivity was achieved through the researchers and the interviewees being encouraged to have the self-awareness to consider the evidence created within the interviews not as an objective truth, but as 'a subjective construction of messy contexts and multiple realities and worldviews' [45,47].

Table 1. Interview adaptations for Greek interviews [24].

Issue	Action
The original questions in English did not directly translate into Greek.	The interview questions had to be rewritten.
The follow-up questions/clarification questions were less effective than in the UK.	A translator translated the answers ad hoc.
Keeping to the interview questions was difficult.	Due to the conversational nature of the participants and the desire for a discussion, the discussion was allowed to flow.
Interviews were more conversational and informal.	It was necessary to gain a certain level of trust from Greek participants, contrasting with UK participants, some of whom preferred to make the interview as concise as possible.

Interviewees are listed in Table 2. To ensure anonymity, all interviewees were given a specific code. The codes are used where quotes are presented or narratives described. Informed consent forms were completed prior to all interviews, confirming the interviewees were happy to take part and for the data to be used in research. The study received ethical approval prior to the interviews from the Royal Agricultural University for phase one interviews (protocol code 20212701 (approved 9 November 2021) and phase two interviews (protocol code 20222923, approved 6 September 2022). All direct interviews were recorded on an audio recorder, transcribed partly by Otter.ai (version 3.109.0) and partly manually,

and then translated where appropriate. Content and thematic analysis was conducted through NVivo v.12 to analyze perceptions, identify patterns, themes and codes, and formulate conclusions. Content and thematic analyses were conducted to evaluate the respondents' responses.

Table 2. List of interviewees.

Description	Code
Greek interviews stage 1 (n = 7)	
Government representative (sent answers via email as they could not meet in person due to the start of the Ukraine war).	GP1
Regional government representative	GP2
Extensive mixed farmer—Fthiotida	GB1
Milk cooperative—Fthiotida	GB2
Pork producer—Fthiotida	GB3
Fishing cooperative—Fthiotida	GB4
Vegetable producer—Fthiotida	GB5
UK respondents stage 1 (n = 12)	
Food and farming organization representative	UKA1
Local government representative	UKA2
Academic-Gloucestershire	UKA3
Academic-Gloucestershire	UKA4
Sustainability organization representative	UKA5
Local government representative	UKA6
Farmer levy body representative	UKA7
Goat meat producer—Gloucestershire	UKB1
Large restaurant and food retailer—Gloucestershire	UKB2
Social enterprise community kitchen—Gloucestershire	UKB3
Farmers market representative—Gloucestershire	UKB4
Farm shop retailer—Gloucestershire	UKB5
UK respondents, stage 2 (n = 20)	
Very small cookery school	SUKB1
Medium drinks producer (product-only)	SUKB2
Larger dairy distributor, Gloucestershire	SUKB3
Small food shop	SUKB4
Small granola producer (product-only), Gloucestershire	SUKB5
Larger restaurant and food retailer, Gloucestershire	SUKB6
Mid-range dairy farm and cheese producer, Gloucestershire	SUKB7
Very small coffee distributor (product-only)	SUKB8
Mid-sized goat meat farmer, Wiltshire	SUKB9
Medium-sized cookery school, Gloucestershire	SUKB10

Table 2. *Cont.*

Description	Code
Mid-sized fruit farmer with café, Gloucestershire	SUKB11
Small brownie producer (product-only), Gloucestershire	SUKB12
Small bakery/patisserie, Gloucestershire (product-only)	SUKB13
Medium-sized farm shop and restaurant café, Gloucestershire	SUKB14
Very small cookery school, Gloucestershire	SUKB15
Very small pastoral farm, Gloucestershire	SUKB16
Mid-sized farm shop and café, Gloucestershire	SUKB17
Medium-sized coffee distributor, Gloucestershire	SUKB18
Medium-sized farm shop, Gloucestershire	SUKB19
Mid-sized dairy farm and gelato producer, Gloucestershire	SUKB20

The second round of interviews (n = 20) was conducted between December 2022 and April 2023, concentrating on the region of Gloucestershire, UK. Food businesses at different loci within AFNs and operating within or close to Gloucestershire were considered. All selected businesses were pre-screened to determine that they operated within an AFN. The screening involved determining whether they were part of an 'economy of qualities' [48]. These businesses either operate in apposite activities to 'bulk commodity production' to redistribute financial and non-financial value through the food system, derive a value proposition through the development of trust between food producers and consumers, and/or provide alternative forms of food-related socio-political assemblage and market governance [49]. The businesses within the research sample were either farmer-producers, product-only producers, distributors within AFNs, or those focused on food-related education and/or creating food experiences. Business interviewees were chosen to align with the following criteria: size requirements of business, i.e., micro-, small- or medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs) (fewer than 250 employees, under 50 m euro annual turnover, or having an annual balance sheet of under 43 m (European Commission [50]). These elected enterprises represented different sizes and foci and were located within different parts of the network, within the search areas of Gloucestershire, UK, and operating as part of an AFN. The positioning of MSME meant that there was a range in the size of organizations in the sample population.

Respondents from these businesses were interviewed using an exploratory semi-structured approach to gather data. Interviews were conducted in person, recorded on an audio recorder, and transcribed using Dragon software v.15. As with the first round of interviews, content and thematic analysis was conducted using NVivo v.12. Whilst consumer interviews were not conducted, interviewees at both stages often referred to their perceptions of consumer behavior; hence, many quotes from our findings reflect what they believed or experienced arising from their interaction with customers. It is a limitation of this work that consumers were not interviewed directly, but the focus was on the businesses themselves and their perceived identity and their perceptions of their customers' experiences.

The qualitative methodology employed in this study was textual analysis through close reading, which subsequently informed the thematic analysis. Textual analysis is a methodology that develops insights into the language present in conversations and texts (transcripts) to interpret how people make sense of and communicate their life experiences [51]. Close reading is the detailed examination of text through repeated reading,

annotation and interpretation to determine not only what is said, but also what it could mean. Key questions the researcher will ask are as follows:

- Why has the interviewee or text used that particular term or phrasing?
- What perspectives are emphasized in the narrative?
- How has their argument developed?
- Does the text support multiple interpretations, i.e., are there particular ambiguities or multiple perspectives within the text from one interviewee or between interviewees?

Close reading forms the first stage of a series of iterative analysis, thematic coding and the emergence of specific themes. A series of iterative researcher discussions on the findings acted as both a form of quality control for the coding approach and the development of the codebook, and with the development of the 5Cs conceptual themes. The close reading and iterative thematic code development were informed by the four non-financial alter-values defined by Lingham et al. [37], namely, intrinsic value (IV—value derived from the food's intrinsic characteristics); production-related value (PRV—value related to how the food is produced); supply-related value (SRV—value derived from the structure of the supply chain); and emotio-cultural value (ECV—emotional and cultural values associated with food). The findings are explored by theme in the next section of the paper. The Naeem et al. [45] methodological approach, validated in [41] and extended here, has been followed to ensure robustness in the analysis and critique of findings:

- Perspectivization, which informed the structure of this paper, the articulation of the research questions, interview guidelines and the interviews themselves;
- Recapitulation through preparing, close reading through the transcripts, and familiarizing with the contents to inform the inductive development of the codebook;
- Integration by content coding and developing a coding hierarchy;
- Crystallization via reflection and critique to develop and characterize emergent themes;
- Edification via synthesis and conceptual articulation through several conceptual iterations to produce the conceptual outputs of the paper.

The research undertaken is qualitative in nature and, as a result, has some limitations in terms of wider generalization, including the small sample areas in both countries, their lack of representativeness for the whole respective countries, and the purposive, convenient and relatively small sample size (n = 39). The need for a reflexive approach, especially around the degree of inference and generalizability articulated in the crystallization and edification stages of the research, was a focus of the researchers' discussions and revisions of the codebook and the emergence of the 5Cs typology. The research observations and their analysis are synthesized and critiqued in the next section of this paper.

3. Results and Analysis

Interviewees at both stages of the research perceived that businesses within AFNs are influential in maintaining non-financial food-related values [46,52], where they are already embedded in food culture (practices, habits and environment) and can facilitate the cultivation of new food-related values (that underpin meaning and significance) [24,41,53]. During recapitulation, the themes that emerged inductively from the thematic analysis of the first stage of research and then deepened during the analysis of the second stage of interviews led to the crystallization of the 5Cs typology. These Cs recognize different, but sometimes overlapping, aspects of business roles within AFNs, namely, promoting continuance, recalibration, connection, commitment, and context. These themes are now analyzed in turn.

3.1. Continuance

Businesses within AFNs provide loci, or 'places', in which consumers can continue to engage with existing food-related values, relive food memories, and create new food memories [54], differentiating themselves from the retail 'spaces' where food is sold as purely a commodity (e.g., in supermarkets). During the first round of interviews, Greek respondents discussed the food produced/caught being seasonal (SRV), "high quality product(s) for the everyday person" (GB2), local (PRV), and supporting local producers and their families over time (ECV). Businesses, where the nutritional value was superior (IV), were seen to stand against commodification and cheaper, lower quality food imports (GB2, GB3, GB4). 'Continuance' as a theme emerged from the interviews due to the articulated appreciation of these values continuing through intergenerational knowledge exchange and the perception that foods and producers were embedded into familial food cultures:

> *"The youngest are picking up food traditions from grandparents… there is an inherited level of understanding of how important food is and the perception of quality is passed through generations."* (GB2)

The UK interviewees likewise felt AFNs provided an opportunity for existing food-related values to continue (UKB5) and described how familial food culture could drive the continuance and cementing of habits into adult life into a personal food culture:

> *"every Sunday Dad comes back with the sourdough loaf and… they'll like the taste… it gives them a… I don't know… Something [with a] standard which is high… And then after that when you go back to… sliced bread under plastic… well, you don't get that…."* (UKB3)

For those appreciating taste, freshness (IV), and connection, farmers' markets were highlighted as providing a space to "live your values" (UKA1) because the food exhibited the qualities being valued. The impact of recent socio-economic crises was discussed, and Greek business interviewees mentioned how some customers bought cheaper products during the financial crisis, but they felt that the values their customers associated with the food they purchased did not diminish; rather, only their ability to choose previous products was impaired (GB5). In the second round of interviews in the UK, respondents described how they perceived the manifesting of food-related values through recalling and/or creating food memories. Food memories were felt to be important in grounding food-related values within a person and reinforcing the *continuance* of those values into the present [23,41]. Memories can initiate a greater emotional response than an 'in-the-moment' cue designed to nudge behavior, showing how powerful they are in influencing food-related decision-making [55]. A proportion of UK business respondents (n = 9) elucidated explicitly how their businesses create memories and promote memory recollection, but this theme was implicit in all responses. SUKB4 perceived themselves as an intermediary between the consumer and the past: the consumer holding ECV for the milk they sell because it is the type of milk they remembered drinking as a child, something SUKB4 feels that they now nurture for them. For SUKB1, customers reported to them that they remembered cooking with their mother or grandma and enjoyed the continuance associated with ECV, reliving these memories and talking about them. They said their customers stated to them they felt closer to their roots and family, demonstrating the reported strength of familial-related food culture. Further, SUKB2 believed their customers craved food from their childhoods. This raises some interesting questions worthy of further research: why might people wish to relive these food-related memories? Do they want to be taken back to a time with loved

ones who are no longer around through the food itself? Do they want to continue these memories with the next generation so they too can feel positively impacted by them?

In addition to the food-related values generated within a familial food culture, early age experiences and the associated memories outside of the familial food culture may also influence how foods are perceived into adulthood. Whilst 'continuance' may not bring about new food values, it can involve finding ways to link to past food experiences that concretize food-related values. In this way, food can become a cultural artifact that reflects who people perceive themselves to be [1].

3.2. ReCalibration

Crystallization of the evidence derived from the interviews led to the theme 'recalibration.' Interviewees reflected on the perceived ability of businesses within AFNs to recalibrate consumer food norms and values through redefining healthy eating practices, providing consumers with knowledge through recalibration of their perceptions of food quality. One respondent felt that media and information sources also promoted recalibration away from traditional food values to new foods and new fashions, where such conventional foods were ultra-processed/unhealthy:

> *"TV and media are behind much of the harm that is happening; there's so much [of a] push in advertising fads and fast food… lacking enough focus on health values and what is good in terms of nutrition… unfortunately what is taught and promoted to kids is crisps, sweets and not things of high nutritional worth."* (GB4)

However, the respondents reflected on the process of recalibrating children's food-related values in particular (see also [52]). GB3 cited their thoughts on the influence of the exposure of children to animals and food production practices and well-being more generally through

> "*inspiring younger generations and children into not being carried away by fads but realizing the more traditional versions of food produce are important for nutrition*."

Paradoxically, social media the interviewees felt provided great opportunity (GB4) to "promote the AFNs and the effort of their local producers" (GP2). From the UK perspective, echoing previous studies [4,5,14,15], it was suggested that food was generally perceived as low value due to the dominance of food retail supermarkets, pace of life, lack of time, and lack of knowledge (UKAs 3, 7, UKBs 3, 4). Many respondents felt that knowledge exchange was important, perceiving businesses within AFNs to be the "embodiment of change" (UKB2) by aiding consumers to understand the virtues of quality (IV), traceability (PRV) and locality (PRV) and to develop an appreciation and understanding of food, which they did not previously have (UKA3, UKA1) within their personal or familial food cultures. Knowledge development fit with the idea of recalibration, thus cementing the term as an overarching finding. Knowledge exchange between the business and customers the interviewees articulated helped customers to understand how and why the products differed from supermarket alternatives (UKA1). For instance, UKB4 gave the example of when customers asked for strawberries when they were not in season in the UK. The people working within the business then had the opportunity to explain seasonality (SRV) to them (UKB2). This was also described in the second round of interviews; one producer described their cloth-bound cheeses and how their customers...

> *"need the education, because we have had a few people write in… and they thought it [the cheese] was going off… because… the cheese is a bit darker nearer the rind. And then you have to explain that, you know, that's what a rinded cheese is."* (SUKB5)

Therefore, interviewees felt the businesses within AFNs can have an active role in promoting a change in habits and lifestyle choices by knowledge exchange, facilitating the growth of interest in values such as PRV and SRV [37]. Customers, one interviewee explained, then expect different things from their food; for instance, the flavor of food products will be different from supermarket equivalents (UKA3). Appreciating the different taste of such foods, one interviewee outlined encourages the development of IV, supported by an understanding of how to cook the meat (UKA3). Some businesses within AFNs in the sample population were very active in this area. UKB5 explained how people visit their farm and can learn about their practices and "definitely... find a new value" in food. SUKB5 also described how,

> *"cheese will taste quite different to what you buy in the supermarket… tastes hugely different, and sometimes you actually need to point it out. And I think if children have been brought up on supermarket cheese, they'll find our cheese maybe a bit weird… once you've explained it, then people can taste the difference."*

SUKB5 found that their customers actively enjoyed being introduced to the product and the exchange of knowledge. They explained, "ohh, they love it... Well, that's all part of the story, isn't it?" Interestingly, the knowledge exchange recalled by the UK respondents was between adults, whereas in Greece, it centered around intergenerational exchange, a pertinent and important distinction. Business-driven recalibration was further expressed in the second round of interviews around the cultural norms of gift giving. SUKB12 witnessed her customers meeting regularly in her café, describing how cultural norms and food culture (ECV), she felt, were developing through celebration of life landmarks and occasion-related gift giving, e.g., new births and commiseration for personal loss were all commemorated with the gifting of SUKB12's brownies. Whilst the brownies may replace more traditional forms of occasion gifting, such as flowers, the brownies, and by proxy, SUKB12 itself, were likely to be linked to remembrance, strengthening relational trust via the food product. Another form of recalibration facilitated by businesses that emerged from the phase 2 interviews could be described as 'raising the quality bar.' Raising the bar through exposure can also relate to shopping experience. For instance, SUKB4 described how their own enthusiasm and knowledge of their products and producers (their suppliers), accompanied by an array of high-quality products (PRV, SRV), they believed meant consumers preferred to shop with them rather than other retailers such as supermarkets. SUKB12 explained how customers stated that due to the high quality of their product they have "ruined all other brownies" for them. This strong IV is something other businesses also sought to achieve, where "nothing else quite compares" to their products and/or the experience (SUKB9). Additionally, SUKB16 sells pork to customers who are normally vegetarians due to actively building relational trust with their customers that the animals had experienced high welfare practices, recalibrating them away from their blanket refusal to eat meat from opaque sources. Part of raising the quality bar, therefore, they suggested, also relates to knowledge exchange. SUKB16 was hesitant to use the word 'education',

> *"But it is education. And your customers start to realize you can taste the difference. And once you've tasted the difference…" consumers don't go back. Indeed, by recalibrating a person's values "you've changed someone's life."* (SUKB10)

These narratives echo the work of [40,42] and others who considered the role of values, identity, personal factors, available resources, social context and the food context itself in informing consumers' food choices. Furthermore, what became apparent during the second stage of interviews was the respondents' perception of consumer ownership as a means

of finding a way around, or through, previous preconceptions about a food or the type of food production. SUKB10 described how a consumer took ownership of a food following exposure to food-related values. They implied that exposure creates connection, and this led to consumer recalibration, a finding worthy of further empirical study. During a cookery class they were facilitating, they explained:

> *"We were doing French onion soup and this one lad who's probably 14–15… getting to know his own ability of being able to say what he wanted to say. But he came up to me and said, 'Well, miss, I don't like onions, I don't like onion soup, I'm not going to do any of this, and I'm certainly not going to taste it!'. [I said], 'That's fine… just chop and do what you need to do'. By the end of it, he tasted it, and it blew his head off, the taste, how amazing it was, and he actually came up to me afterwards and said, 'oh miss, I think that French onion soup is the best thing I've ever tasted."* (SUKB10)

Indeed, Perullo [56] argues that taste as an experiential action puts the pleasure associated with food at the heart of human exposure to experiences and informs attitudes and preferences not only for the food itself but also for how it has been produced. From a gastronomic viewpoint, Ardika et al. ([57], p. 1) outline that

> "*through storytelling and multisensory encounters, this experience generates emotional attachment, satisfaction, revisit intention, and post-visit advocacy,*"

Through exposure, the literature and interviews suggest consumers can develop an attachment to food or the business, which then becomes an important and/or a regular feature in their life. This exposure is related to the businesses that customers purchase food from. SUKB3 explained how some of their consumers are just happy that the business name is on the product even if they understand that it might not have been made by them. SUKB3 felt this was because they perceived that their business had become part of the consumer's family food culture considering the many generations SUKB3 has served. Unlike the Greek interviews, this was the only mention across the interviews of multiple generations of the same family using the same business. Other respondents felt that attachment developed towards the product itself. SUKB5 described their customers subscribing to a monthly delivery, others making it their weekly treat. The "heartfelt" and lengthy reviews customers wrote suggested to SUKB5 that their products had "enriched" their customers' daily lives and thus held an associated ECV:

> *"I feel as if I almost know a piece of their life… so many of the reviews include the journey of how they came across… the granola."* (SUKB5)

These examples demonstrate that the interviewees perceived that ECV aspects of attachment extend beyond more cognitive elements of connection. A major consumer perception of AFNs explored by the respondents (UKB3, UKB4) is the higher cost of local foods [36]. Interviewees felt that farmers' markets and the MSMEs within them try to change these misconceptions (UKB4):

> *"[Some customers are] fairly hard up. And… you can tell by the way they shop, but they can live very well because they have our education or whatever… and they'll come up and they'll buy a bit of beef for stewing or a bit of mince or breast of lamb. And they come and get some spuds, not the washed or the, you know, whatever… two or three grades here… just spuds, some veg. And they spend a fiver and they've gone out with a lot of food. And they know how to cook."* (SUKB17)

Whilst interviewees described how they developed communication strategies to address price, convenience, ultra-processed foods and the strategic development of fast-moving

consumer goods [58–60], the consensus was that lowering food prices makes consumers undervalue food, cementing the idea that food should be cheap. In summary, many businesses felt they were contributing to promoting cultural change in customers' perception of food.

3.3. Connection

When discussing the roles of MSMEs in AFNs, many interviewees explored the types of relationships between producers and customers. The idea of *connection* became an important theme very early in the research, especially via connective exposure to food. This connection was described as both maintaining and renegotiating food-related cultural values. In the phase 1 interviews, Greek interviewees perceived local businesses as facilitators of the ongoing customer connection with local foods. Indeed, often this connection was via the continuing engagement with the same producer for generations (GB2). This 'continuance' of engagement they felt led to connection (ECV). It was this producer-consumer connection that helped businesses during the 2007–2008 financial crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic. One Greek politician cited the 'popular' "social and solidarity economy, which have appeared in recent years" (GP1), concurring with findings in the literature [61,62]. Although businesses did not specifically use the word 'solidarity', it was insinuated in the conversations. For instance, GB2 described how in their cooperative:

> *"our customers are also conscious of the fact that by supporting us they support around 250–300 families of local milk producers."*

Ensuring customers felt connected to locally produced products, they felt it was not limited to producer-consumer connection alone but extended to producer-producer connection too. UK respondents stated that they perceived that farmers' markets were particularly helpful in facilitating consumer-producer relationships (ECV), changing the value of food through direct contact (UKAs 1, 2, UKB4). This direct contact can be an ongoing producer-consumer relationship, the same producers being present weekly. Indeed, UKA2 explained how markets are about:

> *"much more than just the purchase of the food. It becomes a relationship… there's a guy at the farmers' market who sells apple juice, Dave, and he's pressed all my apples for me and again there's a relationship built up there."*

Social solidarity reflects a combination of social interactions within social infrastructures rooted in places (territories) and connection through continued participation [63,64]. The interviewees perceived that the businesses with AFNs can renegotiate the status of food from being a commodity, even a loss-leader to an artifact of connection. In Greece, the connection, the interviewees explained, was to the product and the local community in a wider socio-political idea of social solidarity and solidarity economies [61–66], especially from the perspective of infrastructure [61]; the development of informal networks and solidarity economic initiatives [62,65,66]; social infrastructure and opportunities for community food access [63]; and food security aspects and reducing inequality of access to food [64]. Whereas, in the UK, connection was reported to be through developing the producer-consumer relationship. Connective exposure, the interviewees felt, was fundamental for influencing consumer values. Exposure has also been considered in the literature with regard to marketing campaigns and the food environment [67,68], but here the positioning is more nuanced. UKB2 introduces local businesses to customers and vice versa, enabling fledgling businesses within AFNs to get off the ground by being their first distributor. Interviewees explained that exposing customers to new products and local businesses widened food choice, and availability led to customers buying directly and regularly (SRV)

from the business (UKB2). Additionally, by widening ingredient and food horizons for consumers and tapping into their curiosity, businesses stated they were able to diversify their business strategy and develop resilience.

From the second stage of interviews, a new connective role of businesses emerged from the interviews, which fits within the theme: a sense of consumer-related ownership (ECV), either for the business itself or of the product. For instance, SUKB20 described how many of their customers immerse themselves in the farm experience, and they perceived they derived identity-related value from posting photos onto their own social media channels. Whilst being passive in its role here, SUKB20 felt such a connection gave customers "a bit of an ownership of the cows in a way", highlighting to their followers that they buy produce straight from the farm and care about the cows themselves (PRV, SRV, ECV). Indeed, making the journey to visit the business is another important factor within this idea of identity-related value, and the interviewees perceived this could be satisfying the primitive instinct to hunt and gather food. A modern nuance, SUKB7 perceived, was consumers being able to tell a story about the food to others. This could suggest that the way individuals or communities perceive their self-image and identify can interact with ideals and deeply held beliefs and expectations that influence food choice [42]. In comparison, Greek interviewees did not mention ownership by consumers or ownership of food choices nor identity-related value. Instead, social media was mentioned by them as a tool for businesses.

Additionally, respondents explained how businesses within AFNs can encourage familial connection for their customers, thereby having a wider impact than a linear producer-customer connection. SUKB16 felt they provided a means for consumers to connect with the values they cannot enact during their normal lives by enabling them to live their values through the activities on the farm, providing them an outlet to vicariously follow a different life:

> *"people always say, 'cause I think, 'oh am I posting too many pictures of lambs and this and that': 'no, we love watching your life', because they live it through us."* (SUKB16)

Thus, businesses connected with consumers supported identity-related value, and, in turn, this led to customers' commitment.

3.4. Commitment

Interviewees alluded to the importance of 'commitment'. Reflecting further on the interviewees' responses, commitment emerged from the interviews as being related to the tenacity of businesses to survive and to hold on to their original food-related values (purity) and not change to align with consumers [69]. Commitment was also related by the interviewees to consumers' tenacity to find a way to live their values. Greek interviewees described this in reference to different crises. For instance, GB4 described how, during the 2007–2008 financial crisis, they felt that customers had a choice of whether to follow their values or not, and where customers were committed to purchasing from producers, they had a connection with (ECV). GB4, therefore, did more business, as they described how their customers decided that instead of going to fish tavernas, they should stay at home and invite friends over to prepare the fish meals themselves. The findings also highlight the customer commitment to these values. During the COVID-19 pandemic, business sales increased:

> *"We got the impression that people were even cooking and sharing food in the neighborhood."* (GB4)

Interviewees felt that consumers growing their own food and sharing it, as well as their engaging with the solidarity economy, committed them to supporting producers within AFNs. The COVID-19 pandemic was also mentioned by UK interviewees (SUKB9 and

16) in relation to an increase in consumer interest and support during that time period. The UK interviewees gave examples of their customers' commitment, sometimes as a counterbalance to inconvenience, with UKA6 describing tenacious consumers queuing up outside the butchers at Christmas time. UKB3 described the fine line they perceived between trying to reset and bring about change in cultural norms and putting people off:

> *"sometimes [it] can feel like what you are saying to those who are doing it a different way, [is] 'you're not doing it well enough'… part of our role is just holding the line as a catalyst saying… 'why don't you make your own scotch egg' or 'have you thought about putting more vegetables in your Bolognese?' because actually you could hide 3 types of veg by blitzing it into your Bolognese, and all the kids would eat healthier food."* (UKB3)

Tenacity was insinuated in other forms by interviewees, especially regarding knowledge exchange. UKB4 used Facebook to actively engage in food discussions, as an opportunity to "put somebody right" in their perception of farmers' markets (SRV). Indeed, UKA3 described how businesses must upsell their product, actively trying to educate and change attitudes towards local food. Additionally, SUKB20 cited the difficulties with misinformation and how draining it can be to seek to mitigate it:

> *"there's a lot of false media out there as well…we probably don't fight back as much as we would like to because, as a dairy industry, as a food producing industry, you can feel very brow beaten sometimes can't you, by a lot of the negative press, a lot of the misinformation… It's the silent majority, isn't it? So, we don't… engage as much as we possibly want to on the sort of the argumentation front because I think people like to argue, don't they?… We will do what we can do to sort of fight our corner, but I think the argument is not always easily won because [some] people are so set in their opinion and others are so set in theirs."*

Therefore, the role of businesses within AFN interviewees' perceptions extended far beyond passively providing a product (PRV) for the consumer to buy. Interestingly, although the COVID-19 pandemic was discussed, Brexit was barely mentioned by business interviewees in the UK despite much media attention, highlighting the difficulty for food producers, trade deals, and price competition. Indeed, a certain strength and tenacity to continue emerged in the interviews because of, or in spite of, external factors outside their control. Some business interviewees described divergence from their original values, adapting to the needs of consumers within their locality. For instance, SUKB19 described how they originally wanted to sell only local produce but realized their customers wanted to do a 'whole shop' and therefore had to also sell globally produced products like bananas. As with the ownership theme emerging from the connective role of businesses, ownership is also relevant to commitment, but here it took a more active form, via product co-creation, and was mainly discussed by the education-focused businesses. In the first instance, this related to interviewees reflecting on customers also becoming producers, resulting perhaps from the recalibration of values. Facilitated by SUKB10, one of the customers on a food course, the respondent perceived such "passion" and confidence as a result of their connective exposure that they were empowered to begin a new business making chocolate. SUKBs 1 and 15 also explained the perceived role of businesses within AFNs in building the confidence of their customers, imparting knowledge, and building a sense of freedom. SUKB15 described a woman who attended her class about Middle Eastern food and went home to recreate the menu for fourteen other women that she would soon travel with to the Middle East. The interviewee perceived that she took ownership of the food by making it her own; this process cultivated food-related ECV, as the preparation signified and connected with the start of their trip.

There is another form of 'taking ownership' of food that emerged from the interviews, which relates to for whom the food is prepared. During SUKB15's cookery classes, participants explained they worked in pairs, sharing the experience of cooking together, often realizing they had common ties. Some participants they explained started ©WhatsApp groups and kept in touch after connecting through their exposure to food and the experience. This aspect adds a different element to the concept of ownership; ECV is developed for the food created through the experience of cooking together. In addition, participants then take ownership of that experience by maintaining the friendships formed through the experience, thereby creating a new community. In this context at least, this connection could also bring about a normalization of cooking with others and thus begin to change food culture. Emerging from the responses is the perception that ownership is an overlapping aspect between themes, demonstrating that none of the themes presented herein are mutually exclusive. The final theme that emerged was context.

3.5. Context

Many of the examples of the previous 'C's' relate to the perceived role of businesses within AFNs in renegotiating consumer-held cultural norms associated with food. This section explores the interviewees' perceptions of the renegotiation of business and industry norms, as well as those of consumers. Interviewees felt that, given the food environment, identity-related value, the need for agility at the producer-consumer interface, and the ability to raise customer awareness, it was facilitated by the businesses themselves and brought about through the creation of new food-related cultural norms. For Greek interviewees, businesses provided the context relating to food-related cultural values upon which their food culture is based. Thus, when crises occurred, businesses felt they had the ability to put the situation into context for customers. GB2 described how they felt customers appreciated them, tending to choose their kinds of businesses above others. According to GP1, global food scandals have led to a wavering of trust for conventional food supply systems, highlighting the need for trust between producers and customers. The "global shift from mass to quality" (GP1), raised awareness of businesses, and European measures to strengthen the viability of producers give the possibility to renegotiate the importance of AFNs within food systems. However, from a business perspective, GB2 explains the difficulties of being a co-operative:

> *"when we are altruistic towards all these local milk producers, buying milk from them at a decent price (50 cents/liter) to offer them a decent standard of living… big players are importing milk from Balkans etc. for like 15 cents/liter, then you can imagine we have limited scope for being competitive or setting the standards of the market."*

But many Greek interviewees expressed a desire to continue supplying the everyday person rather than focus on product gentrification:

> *"[you could] move your target group to the very affluent and foodie people, for example… in Thessaloniki… a dairy delicatessen shop but with extortionate, very high quality, very innovative and local products. But that wouldn't be a model for (us)… because the core of the existence is to provide a high-quality product for the everyday person."* (GB2)

Additionally, it was suggested that MSMEs producing higher quality food could play a socio-economic role in adapting food systems (GB1). The context of these changes could be exclusionary and create a divide between consumers interested in cheap food or food out of season and those focused on in-season, quality food. As one interviewee described,

> *"If one year there is no octopus at all, like this year, other private fishmongers, big players or supermarkets will try and source octopus from other sources, no matter where it's*

> *from, simply because their customers want octopus. Whereas in our case, we simply stick to selling whatever is available in the gulf, whatever we catch."* (GB4)

Being agile, interviewees positioned, meant businesses within AFNs can change more quickly than larger businesses (UKA1), and they can "set the example for and inspire people to revalue food" (GB3). Therefore, businesses could be catalysts for long-lasting values-related change for customers, where niche values then become normalized across the whole food supply base.

4. Discussion

The aim of this research was to explore the interviewees' perceptions of the role of food businesses within AFNs in renegotiating consumer cultural norms and food-related values. The research has explored the difference between a passive form of renegotiation between consumers and businesses and an intentional process whereby businesses within AFNs actively engage with and promote food-related values. The respondents felt that businesses can facilitate and enable food memories, whilst renegotiation between the customer and the business of food-related values occurs through continuance. Facilitating the continuance of pre-existing consumer food values strengthens the embeddedness of these values within familial food cultures through conviviality, for instance, and the social embeddedness of the business within the community or AFN [18,24]. The research identified five themes reflecting the perceived roles of businesses within AFNs, which could impact consumer food-related values and cultural norms involving a form of renegotiation of values summarized by the five Cs: Continuance, ReCalibration, Connection, Commitment, and Context.

Continuance is where businesses within AFNs provide loci or 'places' where consumers can continue to engage with existing food-related values, relive food memories, and/or create new food memories [54]. Recalibration is where the business, and the people working within it, have an active role in catalyzing new food-related values that their customers wish to align with. Recalibration can arise, interviewees felt, via discussion and knowledge exchange, whereby customers develop an understanding of and engage with non-financial food-related values. This process can enable the business to better engage with their customers' needs and requirements, especially where this aligns with customer-held personal or familial food cultures. Recalibration is also driven by businesses raising the bar for customers in terms of product quality, and, for customers, once they have experienced that intrinsic quality, to seek to purchase that product again. Interviewees stated that they can recalibrate values back to deep-held traditional cultural values or towards newer, more production- and supply-related market-oriented values.

Connection as a theme emerged as two aspects: product-related, where the customer developed a personal connection or association with the product; and connection through perceptions of the business and the consumer having shared values. An overlap between recalibration and connection was explored by the interviewees. Businesses perceived that they facilitated relationships with customers, the food, and the means of its production, and brought about connection and decommodification. Thus, interviewees felt there could be a mediating role played by MSMEs within AFNs, creating financial and non-financial value through their proximity to customers and their ability to share knowledge and direct exchange [14,15,20]. Through connection and recalibration, interviewees perceived MSMEs could significantly contribute to cultural change via cultivating a deeper meaning for food with their customers, fulfilling one of the tests set by Matacena and Corvo (2020) [5] and contributing to a 're-embeddedness' of food businesses within communities [21]. The role of businesses was shown to be both passive and active. These businesses provided their customers with connective exposure to different foods and businesses within their networks, also widening consumers' curiosity. UK businesses particularly also felt they held a role in

supporting customers to develop an ownership of specific products, co-creation, and even forming an attachment.

Businesses within AFNs were perceived as being actively committed, showing a tenacity to survive and to share knowledge with their customers, particularly in the UK. Commitment here relates firstly to the degree of commitment of organizations to participate in the AFN and to make their products accessible, even creating product-related ownership by customers. Secondly, commitment reflects the commitment from customers to purchase the product. Purity of values is also relevant here, with different effects in each business. Interviews with Greek businesses highlighted that they were committed to not becoming exclusionary and creating niche products through foodification that can only be purchased by well-resourced customers and not others. Continuance reflects the need to make the food accessible to existing customers [8,9], whereas for some UK businesses, creating niche products was the only way to commit to their values. Businesses in both countries gave examples of consumer tenacity, sacrificing time and convenience to patronize businesses within AFNs regularly, another example of cultural change [5]. Additionally, ownership and empowerment were crossover aspects between the themes of connection and commitment, with businesses giving examples of where customers demonstrated tenacity with food-related values often cultivated through connection.

Context was the final emergent theme, related to the ability of businesses to renegotiate their role within the food system whilst providing a catalyst for long-term change in food-related values in the food industry. Thus, through education, collective organization and their purity of values, MSMEs within AFNs perceived they could contribute to wider political and cultural change not just within AFNs but in the wider food system [5]. Finding ways to overcome local, national and global obstacles in developing thriving businesses within vibrant AFNs is crucial, and their influence on public policy or being the solution to mending the 'broken' food system depends on overcoming these. The context of the food environment is specific and perceived as influencing the MSME itself, the products they produce and/or sell, and consumers' personal food culture and food-related values they hold. A balance between active and passive business-related roles was perceived to be important, with businesses explaining their ability to bring about a change in food-related values, many adapting from considering food as a commodity toward food being a cultural artifact.

The contribution of this study is that the focus during the crystallization and edification phases has been on the perceived roles of the businesses themselves in renegotiating the cultural norms and values associated with food. This research was conducted just after the COVID-19 pandemic, and thus reflections and experiences of interviewees may have since developed or changed since 2022–2023. The interviewees' perceptions about the roles of businesses, as with any qualitative research, are grounded but not readily generalizable due to the small sample size. However, the evidence within this paper is relevant and gives meaningful insights into the snapshot of time the data was collected. Further research could explore how businesses perceive the role of businesses within AFNs in renegotiating value today and also engage with consumers directly to determine their views and contrast them to those of the businesses. The 5Cs typology could be applied in future to a wider range of food contexts and food cultures. Whilst there is a body of literature relating to food culture, there is less of an emphasis on the cultural value of food, a specific focus of this study, and the role of businesses within AFNs. For industry and policy, this study has implications because it begins the discussion around the lived experience of food businesses within AFNs and how they see their role in the community, their AFN, wider society, and the food system. Understanding this dynamic better could lead to creating policies and support mechanisms aimed at businesses in particular rather than the development of AFNs per se.

This presupposes the evolution and development of AFNs as a symbiotic process rather than a model that can be prescribed and replicated in every context. The conceptualization and contextualization of renegotiation of food-related values by the businesses themselves within AFNs is an important topic of inquiry, and the strength of this study in particular has been the integration of the comparable and differentiated voices within businesses.

5. Conclusions

The aim of this research was to explore the interviewees' perceptions of the role of food businesses within AFNs in renegotiating consumer cultural norms and food-related values. The five emergent non-exclusionary themes remain helpful in informing further conversation and future research into MSMEs. The interviewees in their discourse articulated aspects of commitment to specific values, had a contextual role in changing wider food system behaviors, and facilitated the continuance of pre-existing high food-related values, providing foci for these consumers. In contrast to conventional food supply chains, these businesses within AFNs and their direct relationship with producers and customers were perceived as meaning that the cultural norms and values associated with the foods are continually negotiated, legitimized, and operationalized, then renegotiated when needed.

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

AFN	Alternative food network
CSA	Community-supported agriculture
ECV	Emotio-cultural value
IV	Intrinsic value
MSME	Micro-, small- and medium-sized enterprises
SRV	Supply-related value
PRV	Production-related value
UK	United Kingdom

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