

COMMENTARY

Rethinking sustainable food supply chains: The role of stakeholders' place identity

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Introduction

The food supply chain (FSC) plays a fundamental role in human society, making its sustainable transformation a crucial issue (Horea-Milcu et al., 2020; Loorbach et al., 2017; Scoones et al., 2020). The

significant impact of COVID-19 has further emphasized the importance of developing a sustainable food supply chain (SFSC) (Aday & Aday, 2020; Brewin, 2020; Galanakis, 2020). However, sustainability transitions cannot be driven by policy alone; bottom-up initiatives from local stakeholders are equally essential. Despite the growing body of literature on sustainable food supply chain management (SFSCM), one key aspect remains underexplored: the role of place identity in shaping bot-

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tom-up stakeholder engagement in sustainability practices. Interviews with FSC stakeholders in Yunlin County, Taiwan (Figure 1), suggest that place identity is a significant driver of their actions to further sustainability. This factor has received limited academic attention in SFSC discussions, however. To address this gap, this commentary argues that integrating place identity into SFSC research offers a more nuanced understanding of how sustainability transitions unfold at the local level. Building on these insights, we propose a potential strategy for integrating agri-food education with the tourism industry through leveraging of place identity. This approach can foster local engagement and support long-term sustainable transformations. We also emphasize the value of interdisciplinary perspectives, particularly linking SFSC studies with human geography, to better

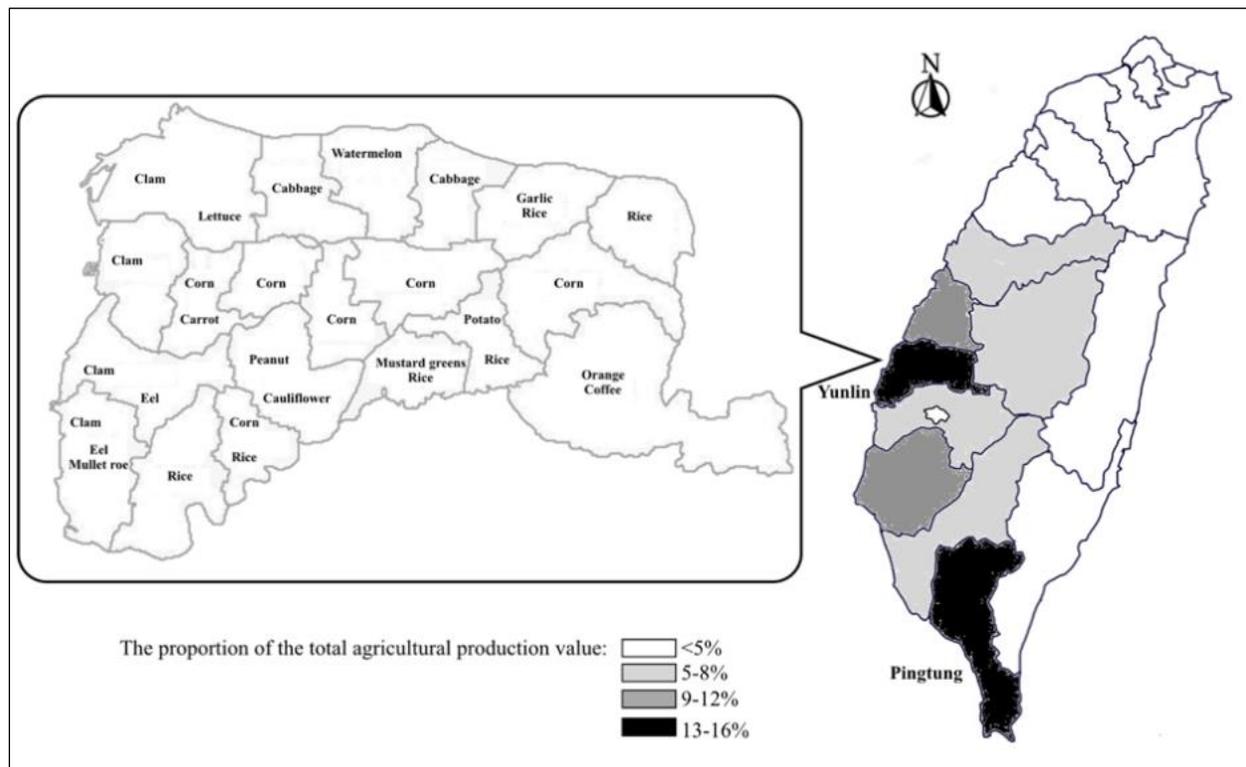
the full range of farms and firms and their successive coordinated value-adding activities that produce particular raw agricultural materials and transform them into particular food products that are sold to final consumers and disposed of after use, in a manner that is profitable throughout, has broad-based benefits for society, and does not permanently deplete natural resources. (Neven, 2014, p. 6)

In other words, the three main components of SFSC are social responsibility, economic viability, and environmentally sound practices (Rodriguez, 2019). However, due to the complexity and contradictions inherent in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Fuso Nerini et al., 2017; Kumar et al., 2024; Maksymiv et al., 2021), a FSC may face numerous obstacles in a sustainable transformation process. In particular, stakeholder lack of understanding the concept of sustainability and related policies, as well as their unwillingness to incur additional costs, pose significant challenges to the promotion of SFSCs.

Discussion

According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (2014), a sustainable food value chain is defined as:

Figure 1. Main Crops Produced in Yunlin and their Proportion of Agricultural Production Value in Taiwan



In this discussion, we explore how local FSC stakeholders' place identity influences their engagement in sustainable actions within their supply chains. Furthermore, we explore how place identity can serve as a foundation for integrating agri-food education with the tourism industry to foster SFSCs. These insights suggest that stakeholder-driven, bottom-up changes may offer an opportunity to reconsider the relationship between people and place (or land) in the development of an SFSC.

Role of Stakeholder Place Identity in SFSC

The concept of place identity emerged in environmental psychology in the late 1970s as a way to understand how place influences individual and collective identity (Hauge, 2007; Proshansky, 1978). While scholars have yet to reach a consensus on its definition, salient perspectives view place identity as either a combination of physical and socio-cultural attributes (Groote & Haartsen, 2008) or a dynamic process shaping territorial boundaries, symbols, and institutions through discourse and narrative (Haartsen et al., 2000; Paasi, 2001, 2003). Despite definitional variations, research consistently highlights the role of place identity in fostering community development (Erfani, 2022; Manzo & Perkins, 2006).

As integral members of their communities, local FSC stakeholders often balance tasks of community development with corporate profitability when making decisions within their supply chains. Their place identity influences their commitment to social responsibility, economic viability, and environmentally sound practices. Drawing on interviews with stakeholders in Yunlin, this section explores how place identity drives sustainable transformation in an SFSC.

Place Identity and Social Responsibility

- **Student lunch support:** Many respondents who operate moderately large-scale businesses stated that they are or have previously been providing unconditional support for lunch

ingredients for local middle and elementary school students.

- **Community senior meal program:** Since Yunlin is a rural area, elder care is one of the most important community issues. In response, most respondents managing moderately large-scale businesses described organizing senior meal programs regularly, and offering free lunches to elderly residents in need.
- **Training contract farmer skills:** Some respondents in the front end of the supply chain seek win-win social responsibility practices. They stated that in order to help contracted farmers improve yields and their incomes, they hire professional instructors to enhance the contracted farmers' agricultural skills.

These key informants indicate that local FSC stakeholders are not focused just on profit-making activities. On the contrary, as Peng et al. (2020) suggest, due to their affective connection to place and land, they also wish for the best development of community actors. Therefore, place identity appears to influence the social responsibility actions taken by FSC stakeholders, which may strengthen what Putnam (1993) describes as social capital: trust, norms of reciprocity, and networks of civic engagement.

Place Identity and Economic Viability

- **Assisting small organic farmers to expand marketing channels:** Some interviewees in the food retail sector stated that in order to support local small-scale organic farmers, they help sell their products to sustain local organic farming.
- **Empowering small farmers:** For certain small farmers with surplus production, some interviewees in food-processing roles provide processing services and introduce branding and marketing channels to empower the farmers and increase their income.
- **Agri-food education:** Some interviewees have experience in organizing food and agricultural education that integrates local agricultural features. They believe such educational programs and activities can generate a certain level of economic benefit.

Apart from social responsibility, we can also see how the local stakeholders place identity in Yunlin fosters the economic viability aspects of SFSCs. However, we are unsure how far the effectiveness or scale of place identity can develop. Moreover, how should the balance be struck between the emotional connection of place identity and the economic interests tied to livelihood management? After all, apart from agri-food education, most actions related to economic viability are essentially based on a “sacrificing one’s own benefits” relationship with local actors.

Place Identity and Environmentally Sound Practices

- **Organic product regulation:** Some stakeholders in the retail sector have a certain level of control and regulatory capacity, and allow small farmers who meet organic standards to sell their environmentally friendly products for free in their stores.
- **Differences in environmental investment:** Since increasing environmental investment generally means higher production costs (e.g., carbon footprint assessments, equipment upgrades), there are significant differences in environmental investment among different local FSC stakeholders. For example, we observed among some interviewees a deep love for the land and strong place identity, but after considering production costs, they are only able to make limited or negligible investments.

Although many studies indicate that place or regional identity helps residents pay attention to environmental issues (Carrus et al., 2005; Uzzell et al., 2002), the influence of local stakeholders’ place identity on environmentally sound practices within an SFSC seems as limited as it is in the economic viability aspect. It is also quite different from its role in the social responsibility dimension. This warrants further exploration in future research.

Place Identity, Agri-Food Education, and the Tourism Industry

As previously stated, several stakeholders confirmed the positive impacts of agri-food education.

Their strong sense of place identity plays a significant role in this willingness to share local agricultural features and knowledge. Similar to what Espulga-Trenc et al. (2021) point out, this connection to their local environment fosters a deeper commitment to sustainability and educational outreach. Place identity, in this context, does not just shape personal or community values—it becomes a driving force for action, particularly in areas like sustainable food production.

In the tourism sector, the concept of sense of place mirrors the influence of place identity. It is frequently used to describe the connections between a tourism destination and its visitors, guiding both their expectations and actual experiences (Abou-Shouk et al., 2018; Jepson & Sharpley, 2015; Shaykh-Baygloo, 2020). These connections can create a unique opportunity for integrating place-based experiences with tourism, so that visitors gain a deeper appreciation for local agricultural traditions and sustainable practices.

By merging the concept of place identity with sustainable agri-food education, there is potential to significantly strengthen the ties between local stakeholders and the tourism industry. Such integration could encourage greater participation from local FSC stakeholders, motivating them to engage more actively in the sustainable transformation of their supply chains. This could lead to ongoing, community-driven efforts toward sustainability, the positive effects of agri-food education extending far beyond temporary initiatives. Rather than being viewed as a short-term project or coaching-driven policy that ends with the expiration of a contract, the sustainable transformation of FSC could evolve into a continuous dynamic process embedded in the local culture and economy.

The combination of agri-food education and tourism, supported by the local stakeholders’ place identity, has the potential to create lasting change in the sustainability practices of local FSC. It allows sustainability to be viewed not as an external imposition but as a natural extension of place identity, one that contributes to both the local economy and the preservation of valuable traditions for future generations. This holistic approach could foster a deeper connection between people, their land, and the sustainable practices they engage in, benefiting

both the community and the broader agri-food sector.

Conclusion

The sustainable transformation of FSC cannot rely solely on top-down policies; bottom-up initiatives driven by local stakeholders are equally vital. Interviews with FSC stakeholders in Yunlin County, Taiwan emphasize how place identity can inspire local actors to engage in sustainability efforts that go beyond profit-making. This highlights the potential of place identity to motivate long-term commitment to sustainable practices. To fully realize this potential, it is crucial to explore further

how place identity can be leveraged to enhance SFSC practices. This commentary advocates for deeper interdisciplinary collaboration between human geography and SFSC studies to explore the role of place identity in sustainability transitions within a FSC. It also encourages integrating agri-food education with the tourism industry, creating ongoing incentives for FSC stakeholders to sustain their sustainability efforts beyond short-term projects or policy-driven initiatives. Ultimately, true transformation in a FSC can only occur when it is driven by the agency and dedication of those directly involved.



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