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GEORGIA
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COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND LOCAL FOOD SYSTEMS: FOCUS ON CARTERSVILLE'S FARMERS MARKET IN GEORGIA

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Introduction

Farmers markets are regular or seasonal community gatherings where local farmers, ranchers, fishers, harvesters, food vendors, and artisans can sell their local and sustainably grown products directly to community members (Warsaw et al. 2021). The number of farmers markets in the U.S. has multiplied by five between 1994 and 2019 (USDA, ERS, 2022). Markets participate in building or maintaining the network of local food systems (Warsaw et al. 2021). Following an important shift in consumer behavior in 2020, some farmers markets had to face a substantial increase in demand for local food products. According to the 2022 Local Food Marketing Practices Survey, on-farm stores and farmers market sales consisted of 59% of direct-to-consumer farm sales, totaling \$1.7 billion in revenue (USDA, NASS 2022).

Numerous surveys have emphasized consumer interest for fresh, high-quality local foods sold at farmers markets. Furthermore, factors such as social appeal, convenience, and ambiance have played significant roles in determining the success of such ventures. Recent studies have broadened their focus to include social and environmental aspects, revealing the broader impacts that farmers markets have on communities.

Sponsored by Bartow County (Georgia) and Cartersville City Government, the Cartersville Farmers Market has benefited from the guidance and support of the University of Georgia County Extension office. Mainly focused on food products and expanding its offering in 2020, the Cartersville Farmers Market has seen close to a 6-fold increase in sales between 2019 and 2022. This study is the result of a collaborative effort among faculty from the University of Georgia's Department of Agricultural and Applied Economics, the Center for Agribusiness and Economic Development, and the County Extension office in Bartow County, GA. This study aimed at defining the profiles and activities of visitors and buyers within the market, while also evaluating its economic, social, and environmental implications.

Methodology

The methodology used to assess the impact of the Cartersville Farmers Market is based on guidelines provided by Thilmany et al. (2016) to evaluate local food systems.

A project advisory team was formed by UGA faculty, the market coordinator, and one sponsor: the Cartersville-Bartow Community Foundation.

The objectives of the study were two-fold:

1. Characterizing visitors' and buyers' profiles and activities;
2. Assessing the economic, social, and environmental characteristics of the market.

More specifically for the second objective, economic, environmental, and social indicators were established to be included in the survey design.

A buyers' survey was conducted directly at the market during the 2022 season using a QR code for participants to scan, and tablets onsite. Volunteers assisted with data collection at the market. As an incentive, participants were invited to provide their contact information separately to be entered for a drawing offered by the market coordinator.

The type of questions were mainly dichotomous, multiple choice, using a likert scale, or open-ended. A quota of 60% female and 50% above 40 years old was set up.

Survey Results

BUYERS' SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILES AND MARKET ACTIVITIES

The sample comprised **111 respondents**: 41% pertain to Generation X (1965-1980), 24% to Generation Y (1981-1996), 16% to Baby-Boomers (1946-1964), 11% to Generation Z (1997-2012), and 8% to Silent (born before 1946).

✓ **Residence** of the respondents: 97% from Georgia and 82% from Bartow County.

✓ **Shopping** is the primary reason for coming to the farmers market (**Figure 1**):

- 71% of respondents purchase at least twice a month at the market.
- Older generations spend more on average.

✓ **Average satisfaction** on a 0-10 scale: **9.4**.

- The most cited words to characterize participants' satisfaction were: Local, Great, Vendors, Produce, Community, Experience, Atmosphere, and Family.

EVALUATION OF THE ECONOMIC, SOCIAL, AND ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT OF THE MARKET

✓ **Economic indicators and impact:**

- More than half of the respondents (56%) are regular buyers of the market. They make a purchase every week during the market season.
- Younger generations tend to buy less often at the market.
- Nearly half of the visitors (41%) spent between \$11 and \$30. A fourth (23%) spent between \$50 and \$100.
- The \$703,243 in vendor sales from the 2022 season resulted in an **estimated impact valuation of \$1,090,280 to Bartow County**.

✓ **Environmental indicators:**

- In terms of green space available and visual appeal, half of the respondents indicated their satisfaction with the current offering. A small portion (13%) would like to see more.
- The following results (**Figure 2**) highlight that the origin of the produce sold drives purchasing decisions followed by production practices:
 - 70% of the sample think that locally grown is very to extremely important.
 - Georgia Grown, the state brand for food products, is also very to extremely important for 60% of the sample.

✓ **Social indicators:**

- As visitors of the farmers market, respondents underscored the great importance of interacting with vendors (68%) and their community (59%) (**Figure 3**).
- Most respondents (76%) also indicated that they are satisfied with the current atmosphere and set up for children (59%).

Figure 1: Primary reason for coming to the farmers market

Shopping	81.90%
Walk around/Passing through	13.80%
Other (Please, specify)	2.10%
No particular reason	2.10%
Ability to purchase using SNAP/EBT	0.00%

Figure 2: Buyers Preferences on Origin and Production practices

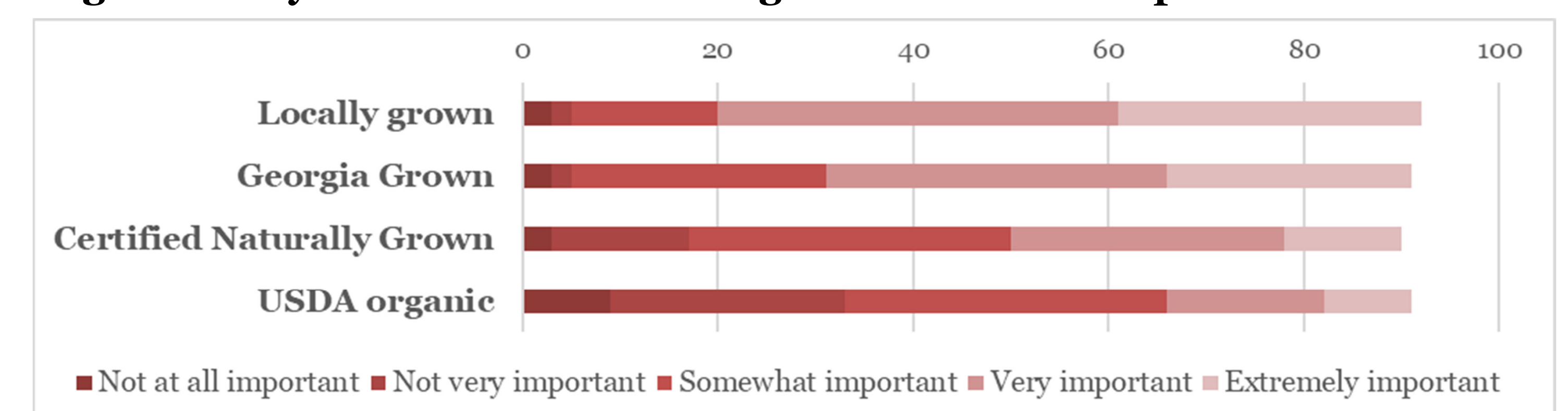
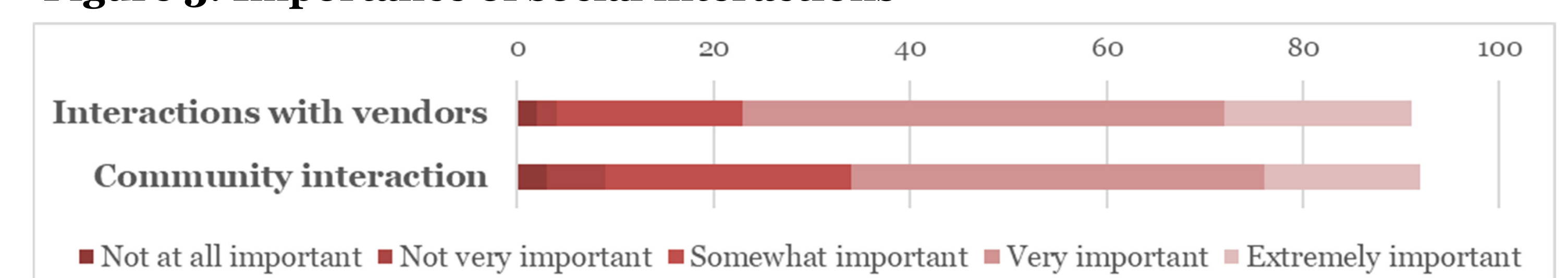


Figure 3: Importance of social interactions



Take-Away

The level of satisfaction measured by this visitors' survey highlight how successful the Cartersville Farmers Market has been at meeting buyers' expectations.

In terms of strategic planning for farmers market practitioners, there are three major take-aways that should be considered:

1. **The holistic characteristic of a market:** buyers are sensitive to experience, atmosphere, and social interactions with vendors and other buyers.
2. **Younger buyers** represent an opportunity for local producers to build on.
3. **Partnerships with local businesses** selling at the market or surrounding the market benefit economic development in the community.

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