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Identifying community supported agriculture (CSA) member types: A cluster analysis to inform strategies for targeted engagement and retention

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Abstract

Community supported agriculture (CSA) is a partnership between community members and local farms in which members subscribe to receive a regular share of locally grown produce throughout the growing season. This study used semi-structured interviews with 18 current and former CSA members to examine how attitudes, social influences, and perceived behavioral control shape CSA participation. Cluster analysis of the interview data grouped participants according to shared response patterns and characteristics. Two distinct groups emerged from the analysis: health-conscious members who enjoyed trying new foods (Type 1) and socially motivated members who prioritized community connections (Type 2). Type 2 included three subgroups: Ritualistic Locavores, Sustainable Agricultural Advocates, and Practical Sharers. These findings suggest that CSA members are not a homogeneous group, and that CSA programs may need targeted strategies to improve member engagement and retention.

Keywords

cluster analysis, community supported agriculture, CSA, local food system, alternative food network, consumer motivation, member retention, theory of planned behavior, qualitative research

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Introduction

Community supported agriculture (CSA) is a direct marketing model that connects consumers with local farms through advance payment for a share of the farm's harvest. Interest in local food and direct-to-consumer purchasing has grown in recent years, leading to the continued expansion of CSA programs and other direct marketing channels (Low et al., 2015; Ricker & Kardas-Nelson, 2020; Spalding, 2024). As CSA programs evolve to serve increasingly diverse consumer populations, understanding the factors that influence participation has become more important for supporting these programs' long-term success.

CSAs have been found to promote numerous positive health behaviors (Vasquez et al., 2017; Wharton et al., 2015; Wilkins et al., 2015), including increased fruit and vegetable consumption and improved cooking knowledge and self-efficacy (Hanson et al., 2017; Horning et al., 2021; White et al., 2018). Participation in a CSA can provide consumers with the knowledge, motivation, and skills to adopt healthier dietary practices (Allen et al., 2017). As evidence of these benefits has grown, CSA programs have expanded to serve new populations, including participants in institutional health and wellness programs and urban food access programs (Jablonski et al., 2019). For example, some CSA programs have diversified and expanded their customer base by partnering with healthcare providers or health insurers to offer cost-offset CSA shares to patients and health plan members. These partnerships have substantially increased demand for CSA shares (Gusto et al., 2024; Woods et al., 2017). These initiatives align with evidence that healthfulness is a key motivation for local food purchasing (Adams & Adams, 2011; Bond et al., 2008; Thilmany et al., 2008).

Despite these benefits and growing interest in CSAs, recruiting and retaining members remain persistent challenges for farms running CSA programs. Many CSA programs face increasing competition from meal-kit services, grocery delivery, and other convenience-oriented food purchasing options (Rossi et al., 2025). Research suggests that barriers such as limited knowledge of local food, perceived accessibility challenges, and the time demands of CSA participation may discourage enrollment and renewal (Chen et al., 2019; Khan & Prior, 2010). Convenience has been identified as one of the strongest determinants of local food purchasing and of CSA enrollment and membership retention (Galt et al., 2019).

Among the convenience-oriented alternatives competing with CSAs, meal-kit services have emerged as a model that addresses many of the logistical and meal-planning challenges associated with preparing meals at home. Meal kits provide preportioned ingredients, recipes, and cooking instructions, reducing the time and effort required for meal planning and grocery shopping. Consequently, they have experienced rapid market growth and are predicted to reach US$19.9 billion in annual sales in the U.S. by 2027 (Grand View Research, 2020). Although some consumers express concerns about packaging waste, food safety, and environmental impacts, many are willing to pay a premium for meal kits containing organic or locally sourced ingredients (Yoon et al., 2022). Given the importance of consumers' preference for convenience in CSA participation, meal kits provide a useful comparison because they address many of the same consumer needs while reducing the time and effort required for meal planning and food preparation. Examining how consumers compare these models may therefore provide insight into strategies for improving CSA engagement and retention.

CSA members encounter diverse facilitators of and barriers to participation, suggesting that a one-size-fits-all approach to member engagement may be insufficient. Tailored interventions, which are designed to fit the needs of specific individuals or groups, have demonstrated greater effectiveness than standard approaches for promoting nutrition-related behaviors (Ryan & Lauver, 2002). One approach to identifying groups for tailored engagement strategies is cluster analysis, which groups individuals based on shared characteristics or response patterns (Ryan & Lauver, 2002).

The purpose of this study was to examine how attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control shape experiences with CSA participation and to identify distinct CSA member types that can inform targeted recruitment, engagement, and retention strategies.

Guided by the decomposed theory of planned behavior (DTPB), the study addressed two research questions:

1. How do attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control shape CSA members' experiences and participation?
2. What distinct CSA member typologies emerge from these shared patterns of experiences, and how can they inform tailored CSA program design?

The theory of planned behavior (TPB) has been used widely in social and behavioral research for several decades, including in previous research on CSA membership (Wharton et al., 2015) and local food purchasing behavior (Kumar & Smith, 2018; Robinson & Smith, 2002; Thomas & Mcintosh, 2013). DTPB expands TPB by specifying the underlying beliefs that shape attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control, providing a more detailed framework for understanding behavioral decision-making (Ajzen, 1985; Taylor & Todd, 1995). This additional specificity enables researchers to identify particular factors influencing behavior, such as perceived usefulness, compatibility, social influences, self-efficacy, and facilitating conditions, rather than examining only the three broad theoretical constructs. Because this study sought to better understand the factors influencing CSA participation, DTPB provided an appropriate theoretical framework for guiding data collection and interpretation.

Research Methods

Recruitment

To identify interview participants who were knowledgeable about and experienced with CSA membership and meal kit services, we used purposive sampling (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). We deployed an initial recruitment survey using Qualtrics. Farms with CSA programs distributed the survey to their email lists of current and former members. Additional recruitment occurred at farmers markets and CSA pickup locations, where flyers with study information and a QR code linking to the survey were distributed. The sign-up survey collected demographic information (e.g., age, income, household composition), CSA membership status, and experience with meal-kit services. Sixty-nine valid responses were received, from which 18 interview subjects were selected. Participants were selected to ensure representation across CSA member status, including current members, former members intending to rejoin, and former members not intending to rejoin. The final sample was selected to maximize variation across key characteristics, including membership status, age, meal-kit experience, household composition, and income levels (Etikan et al., 2015).

Data Collection and Instrumentation

We invited selected participants to participate in semi-structured interviews conducted via Zoom. We used a common interview guide across interviews, with follow-up questions and probes used to clarify and expand upon participants' responses. We conducted interviews between August and September of 2022 until we reached data saturation. Interviews ranged in length from 27 to 80 minutes. We developed the semi-structured interview guide using the DTPB as a theoretical framework. The interview guide explored attitudes toward CSA participation (e.g., perceived compatibility, complexity, expected benefits, cost), subjective norms (e.g., the influence of friends, family, other social relationships), and perceived behavioral control (e.g., convenience, cooking skills, access to recipes, and logistical factors such as pick-up flexibility) (Kumar & Smith, 2018; Wharton et al., 2015). The interview guide can be found in Appendix A.

Data Analysis

We analyzed the interview transcripts using NVivo qualitative data analysis software (version 12 Plus) using a thematic analysis approach (Saldaña & Omasta, 2022). Before analyzing the data, we developed a preliminary codebook based on the research questions, DTPB, and review of relevant literature. To capture emergent themes, we added inductive codes to the analysis. Two members of the research team independently coded the transcripts. A third member of the research team reviewed the analysis for accuracy.

Following coding, we conducted a cluster analysis using the Jaccard coefficient in NVivo 12 Plus to develop a CSA member typology. Similarity between interviewees was assessed using the Jaccard coefficient, which measures the proportion of shared codes relative to the total codes present between pairs of cases, excluding joint absences (Bisandu et al., 2019). A total of 204 codes (12 primary codes and 192 subcodes) were treated as binary variables (present = 1, absent = 0) in 153 pairwise comparisons between interviewees. The 12 primary codes captured key dimensions of CSA participation, including perceived compatibility and complexity of membership, comparisons with other food sources, perceived benefits and utility of shares, motivations for joining and maintaining membership, and influence of social factors. These comparisons produced a dendrogram, which visually represents relationships among interviewees by clustering those with the most similar coding patterns. Because the dendrogram does not indicate which coding patterns contributed to cluster formation, a post hoc analysis was conducted using constant comparative analysis to examine coding patterns alongside the cluster structure. Interviewee demographics were incorporated into the analysis to aid the interpretation of the typologies. Together, these approaches facilitated a deeper understanding of patterns across interviewees that may not have emerged from either method alone (Bazeley, 2021).

Results

Demographics

Our final sample included 18 individuals from five counties in Florida. All participants were current or former CSA members. Eleven participants (61%) were current CSA members. Among noncurrent members (n = 7), four planned to rejoin. The sample was predominantly female (72%). Half of the participants were aged 30–39. The sample was highly educated, with 67% having a graduate degree. Most participants (67%) were married, and less than half (38%) had children living at home. All participants had purchased food from a farmers market before, and almost all (89%) had purchased food directly from a farm. Nearly half (44%) had used meal-kit services in the past. A small proportion (17%) had received food assistance in the past 12 months (see Table 1). Although the sample reflects a relatively experienced and engaged group of local food consumers, participants shared several common expectations and needs related to CSA participation.

Common Requirements for Successful CSA Participation

Despite the emergence of distinct typologies, two factors were shared by nearly all interviewees. These two factors were: the need for logistical convenience, and the ability to use the produce received in their shares, highlighting those two factors as baseline conditions for successful CSA participation.

Convenience, particularly related to pick-up location, was identified as an important factor by almost all participants (94%). For many participants (41%), pick-up was convenient if it could be integrated into existing routines, as expressed by Karen[1] who said, "I pick [my daughter] up at five o'clock and then I literally drive right there, get it, and come home. So, it just fits in really well." Others (35%) emphasized flexibility, such as the availability of multiple pick-up locations and days. Home delivery was also identified as desirable by some participants (29%). Proximity to pick-up locations (18%) reinforced the importance of logistical burden, with some participants switching CSAs based on pick-up location.

Beyond acquiring shares, participants consistently emphasized the importance of the ability to use share contents, including the need for skills and resources to use their CSA shares. Without prompting from the interviewer, almost all interviewees emphasized the importance of having access to a searchable recipe repository (94%) and having adequate cooking skills (89%). All but one participant reported using online resources to identify recipes to use the contents of their shares. Participants relied on a mix of sources, including general internet searches (35%) and self-curated sets of

[1] Pseudonyms are being used to protect the anonymity of our interview subjects.

Table 1. Demographics and Household Characteristics of Interview Subjects (*N* = 18)

Variable	f	%
Education Level		
Graduate or Professional Degree	12	66.7
Bachelor's Degree	4	22.2
Associate's Degree	2	11.1
Gender		
Female	13	72.2
Male	5	27.8
Age		
18–29	3	16.7
30–39	9	50.0
40–49	1	5.6
50–59	2	11.1
60–69	2	11.1
70 or older	1	5.6
Current CSA Membership		
Yes	11	61.1
No, but I am planning to renew	4	22.2
No, and I do NOT plan to renew	3	16.7
Food Sources		
CSA membership	18	100
Farmers Market	18	100
On Farm	16	88.9
Grocery Delivery Service	11	61.1
Meal-Kit Service	8	44.4
Meal-Kit Purchases		
Never	10	55.6
2–10 times	5	27.8
More than 10 times	2	11.1
Once	1	5.6
Employment Status		
Full-time	10	55.6
Part-time	2	11.1
Student	2	11.1
Stay at home parent	1	5.6
Retired	1	5.6
Unemployed	1	5.6
Other	1	5.6
Caregiver		
Living Situation		
Married or live with domestic partner	13	72.2
Live alone	3	16.7
Other	2	11.1
Children Living in the Home		
No	11	61.1
Yes	7	38.9
Food Assistance (past 12 months)		
No	15	83.3
Yes	3	16.7

frequently used recipes. Interestingly, 22% of interviewees specifically mentioned using *New York Times* recipes, such as Erin who said, "I have a binder of New York Times recipes that are relevant to the CSA. So, we have a stash of recipes that are things we commonly get." Fewer participants (18%) reported using the CSA's website or the recipes sent with the shares.

Although these shared characteristics establish common baseline needs, the cluster analysis revealed important differences in how participants experienced their CSA memberships. These distinctions are explored in the following sections through differences in attitudes, social influences, and perceived behavioral control across typologies.

Cluster Analysis

The cluster analysis revealed two primary CSA member typologies (Type 1 and Type 2), reflecting distinct patterns in how participants experienced and engaged with CSA membership. Type 1 participants were health-conscious members who enjoyed trying new foods, and Type 2 participants were socially motivated and joined a CSA to foster community connections. Type 2 further differentiated into three subgroups (Types 2.1–2.3), indicating additional variation within the socially oriented members (see Figure 1). These typologies were defined by shared and contrasting themes in interview responses, capturing variation in attitudes, social influences, and perceived behavioral control.

Type 1: The Health-Conscious Adventurers

Type 1 participants ("Health-Conscious Adventurers," $n = 7$) approached CSA membership as a health strategy and an opportunity for culinary exploration, given their enjoyment of trying new foods and emphasis on the health benefits from their CSA membership. All Health-Conscious Adventurers were either current CSA members or former members who intend to renew. Most were married (71%), and one had children living at home.

Attitudes. For these adventurous individuals, CSA membership was highly compatible with their lifestyle because they enjoyed trying new foods. Rather than viewing unfamiliar produce as a barrier, they described the challenge of creating new meals with the diverse produce provided in their

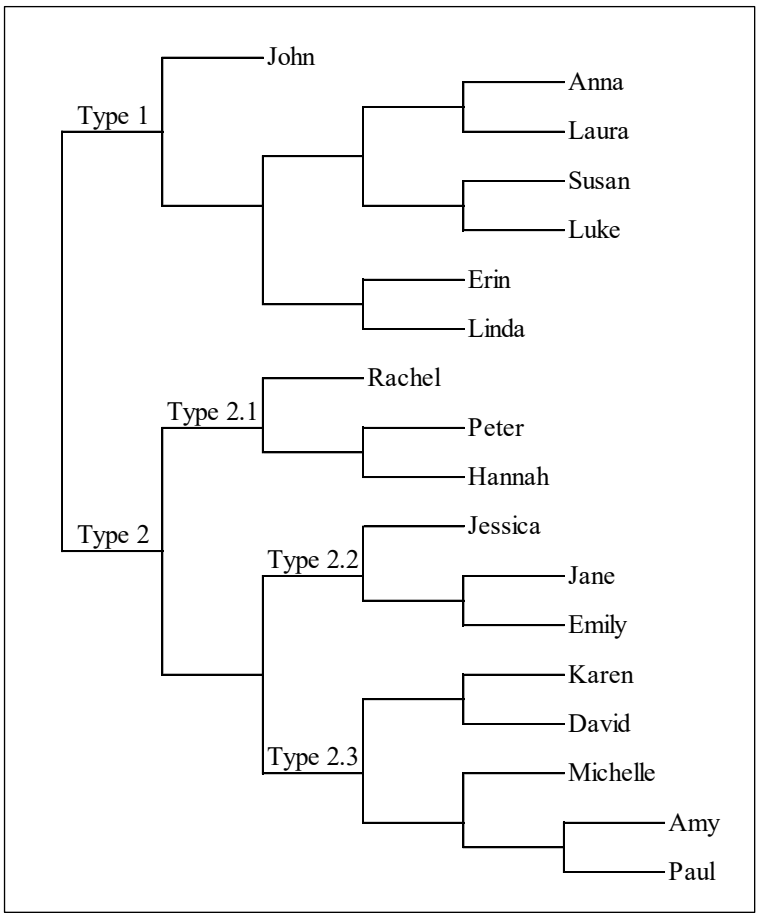
shares as "fun." As Laura explained, "I love CSA because I love … getting a bunch of random stuff and trying to come up with something to make out of it."

Health benefits were central to this group's decision to participate in a CSA. All Health-Conscious Adventurers emphasized being healthier because of consuming more nutrient-dense, unprocessed foods that were grown locally. For some (43%), CSA membership aligned with their personal preferences and values. Erin captured this sentiment well by stating, "I felt like it's the way I wanted to be eating—eating more vegetables, eating locally, supporting local businesses." Interestingly, some of these CSA members (29%) linked their CSA participation to managing specific health conditions, including gallstones and celiac disease.

Although the cost was identified as a common drawback shared by most Health-Conscious Adventurers (71%), it did not deter them from maintaining or desiring to continue their CSA membership, suggesting that the compatibility of CSA membership and the perceived benefits outweighed their financial concerns.

Perceived Behavioral Control. Time was the primary constraint for the Health-Conscious Adventurers, and most (71%) specifically emphasized needing adequate time to cook. Susan emphasized this when she said, "You've got that week for that produce, so you need to start right away." Although these individuals enjoyed experimenting with new foods, most (71%) noted the necessity of having knowledge of flexible "go-to" recipes that incorporate available ingredients with an understanding of what goes well together. John explained this balance of experimentation and reliable recipes well: "You know these things will go really well together for this type of meal. … Other things, I don't know what they are. Let's try one raw. Let's try one in a juice. Let's try one sautéed." Lastly, most Health-Conscious Adventurers (71%) enjoyed receiving recipes from the farms they receive their CSA shares from—whether to replicate them directly or simply draw inspiration.

Figure 1. Cluster Analysis Dendrogram



Normative Beliefs. Social influences played a minor role in Health-Conscious Adventurers' CSA participation. Only a few (29%) reported first learning about CSAs through friends. Although none of the Health-Conscious Adventurers cited social connection as an initial motivation for joining, some (29%) later acknowledged the benefit of fostering relationships with other CSA members and/or the farmer. This limited role of social influence highlights that this group has intrinsic motivations of health and experimentation as primary drivers of CSA participation.

The Ideal Share. In describing their ideal share, most Health-Conscious Adventurers (86%) wanted more variety in what is included.

However, they simultaneously expressed a preference for receiving more familiar "basic" foods in their shares. For example, Laura explained, "If I had to choose between getting more of the basics, like potatoes, carrots, greens, I would definitely choose getting more of that than getting different things." This suggests that while variety is valued, Health-Conscious Adventurers also prioritize having familiar staple items.

Convenience is another key characteristic of the ideal share for most Health-Conscious Adventurers (71%). Four out of the five Health-Conscious Adventurers who emphasized convenience specifically expressed a desire for home delivery. Erin put it best when she said, "What else would have made it easier. … If they would deliver it to my house, … That would be pretty sweet." Participants living near pickup locations preferred to maintain those arrangements in their ideal shares.

Together, these findings suggest that Health-Conscious Adventurers are highly motivated CSA members, but they require structural supports, particularly time and adequate financial resources, to sustain their participation.

Type 2: The Social Seekers

Type 2 CSA members ("Social Seekers," $n = 11$) approached CSA membership primarily as a means of fostering social connections and community engagement, with most (73%) identifying social relationships as a key benefit of their CSA membership. Some Social Seekers (27%) described forming a connection with the farmer and with other CSA members. As Peter noted, "I like seeing the same person every week. … It's just a nice community thing." One participant reported that they would like more opportunities to connect with their CSA farmer, but the convenience of the pickup location outweighs going to the farm to meet the farmer. Social networks played an important role in recruiting Social Seekers to CSA membership, with most (73%) reporting that a friend had originally introduced them to the CSA.

Despite their strong social motivations, most (82%) struggled with using all the produce in their shares before it spoiled. Nearly half (46%) reported that the excessive quantity of produce was a key challenge. Participants adapted by switching to biweekly shares to reduce waste, even if that meant they would run out of produce before receiving their next share. Jane highlighted this difficulty well when she said, "I think, in that first year, when there were so many greens, it was more like, 'I can't freeze any more. I can't eat anymore. I've gone through a bunch of new recipes.'"

Within this group, three distinct subtypes emerged: Ritualistic Locavores, Sustainable Agricultural Advocates, and Practical Sharers. These subtypes are described below.

Type 2.1: The Ritualistic Locavores

Type 2.1 ("Ritualistic Locavores," $n = 3$) were characterized by their affinity for routine and connection with their local community. Locavores are consumers who prioritize purchasing and consuming locally produced foods (Stanton et al., 2012). All Ritualistic Locavores were CSA members who used meal-kit services in the past. This type was relatively young, with ages ranging from 18 to 39 years old.

Attitudes. Similar to Health-Conscious Adventurers, Ritualistic Locavores all reported that CSA membership supported their dietary preferences, with all following a vegetarian diet. All Ritualistic Locavores also enjoyed experimenting with the variety of foods provided in their shares. A defining feature of this group was a strong sense of place, a characteristic that was not observed with any of the other subgroups. Rachel described the connection between her CSA membership and sense of place well when she said, "I've never really felt like I've put down roots in a place. … I can make food choices that are not just about the health of my family, but about the health of my community and the soil that is local."

All Ritualistic Locavores emphasized that a key benefit of CSA membership was supporting the environment through reduced food waste, despite acknowledging that they were not always able to consume all their produce before it spoiled. In addition to not being able to use up all the produce before going bad, cost was another common drawback noted by all Ritualistic Locavores.

The Ritualistic Locavores compared CSAs with meal kits, valuing the convenience and skill-building meal kits can provide but criticizing the increased waste and reduced creativity that come

with meal kits, compared with their CSA membership. All Ritualistic Locavores appreciated the convenience of meal kits, particularly the preportioned ingredients and included recipes. Most (67%) reported that the meal kits provided them with an opportunity to learn new cooking skills. Only one participant cited the tastiness of the meals as an advantage.

The main disadvantage of meal kits reported by all Ritualistic Locavores was the amount of packaging waste. Another disadvantage reported by most Ritualistic Locavores (67%) was that the meal kits limited their creativity in the kitchen. Only one noted the cost and small portion sizes of meal kits as a drawback relative to their CSA share.

It is worth noting that most Ritualistic Locavores (67%) appreciated that the CSA simplified or eliminated grocery shopping. This is not surprising, as many had previously used meal-kit subscriptions, which similarly reduced their need for shopping.

Perceived Behavioral Control. As with Health-Conscious Adventurers, all Ritualistic Locavores agreed that sufficient knowledge of recipes is needed to successfully manage all the contents of the shares. Also like the Health-Conscious Adventurers, most Ritualistic Locavores (67%) emphasized the importance of having enough time to cook. Hannah explained her strategy by noting, "In terms of time and energy, we cook once or twice a week and then are eating leftovers."

Normative Beliefs. Social benefits were not valued as strongly in this group as compared with other subgroups. The Ritualistic Locavores did mention some social benefits of their CSA membership. For example, most Ritualistic Locavores (67%) noted that their membership provided them with an opportunity to build relationships, specifically with other CSA members. Most Ritualistic Locavores (67%) expressed a desire to encourage others to join a CSA.

The Ideal Share. Unlike any other type, consistency was central to the ideal share for Ritualistic Locavores. Specifically, these routine-driven individuals relied on having the same produce provided in the box and receiving their share at the same time and place week to week. Rachel explained how the consistency of the share pairs well with her desire to experiment: "They make it very, very easy for us. They don't change it up on us. It's consistent."

Type 2.2: The Sustainable Agricultural Advocates

Type 2.2 ("Sustainable Agricultural Advocates," $n = 3$) were defined by strong connections to agriculture and a commitment to supporting sustainable farming practices. Most Sustainable Agricultural Advocates (67%) were current CSA members.

Attitudes. Like the Health-Conscious Adventurers and Ritualistic Locavores, the Sustainable Agricultural Advocates valued experimentation. A unique challenge reported by these Sustainable Agricultural Advocates was coordinating their CSA share around their travel schedules. Most Sustainable Agricultural Advocates (67%) knew that they were able to put a hold on their share, while the remaining members were unaware whether their share offered a hold. Emily described the ease of placing their share on hold well when she said, "It's really easy to place a hold. So, when we go on vacation, we can just skip a week." One member noted that a friend who was also a CSA member was able to pick up their share while they were traveling.

The Sustainable Agricultural Advocates were the only group in which the majority did not mention cost as a drawback of CSA membership. All emphasized that sustainable farming practices, such as land preservation and the use of nontoxic chemicals, were an important benefit of CSA membership. Jane said: "…they're not using pesticides and all of those toxic chemicals, so that's another environmental factor."

Like the Health-Conscious Adventurers, all Sustainable Agricultural Advocates reported that their CSA aligned with their special dietary habits. Most Sustainable Agricultural Advocates (67%) specifically noted that their share supported the management of health conditions, such as hypertension, diabetes, and rheumatoid arthritis.

Perceived Behavioral Control. Recipe knowledge was also essential for this group. They expressed a desire for more variety in their shares. Unlike any other type, Sustainable Agricultural Advocates specifically noted that recipes provided

by the CSA were a helpful resource.

Normative Beliefs. Social influence was strong for this group, with all valuing social connections as an important benefit of their CSA membership. Most Sustainable Agricultural Advocates (67%) had heard about the CSA through a friend. This was the only subgroup in which all members wanted to encourage others to join the CSA. Sustainable Agricultural Advocates were the group with the highest proportion of members (67%) who reported sharing their CSA shares with others. Emily explained how she got her parents involved with a CSA by sharing her produce with them: "We did get my parents involved. … We do a family share from [the farm]. … Between the five of us, we have plenty of vegetables for the whole week."

The Ideal Share. Customization was central to the ideal share for this subgroup, particularly in the ability to select the type of produce included in their share. Jessica said that having "a checklist of things that you wanted" would be ideal. Like the Health-Conscious Adventurers, most Sustainable Agricultural Advocates (67%) would like convenient pickup logistics to be a primary characteristic of their ideal CSA.

Type 2.3: The Practical Sharers

Type 2.3 ("Practical Sharers," $n = 5$) prioritized the functional use of their CSA shares, emphasizing family preferences and minimizing food waste over experimentation. Only one Practical Sharer was a current CSA member, and only two of the four former CSA members planned to renew their membership. Most (80%) had children living at home.

Attitudes. Interestingly, the Practical Sharers were the only group in which individuals did not mention enjoying experimentation with the contents of their shares. However, like the Health-Conscious Adventurers and Ritualistic Locavores, most Practical Sharers (80%) reported that their CSA membership supported their dietary patterns. Family preferences were a major constraint for this subgroup, with all Practical Sharers reporting that family members not liking what was provided in the shares as a drawback to their CSA membership. Amy explained this challenge well when she said, "I have teenagers now, so sometimes they're rolling their eyes at what they get in the box." Another common drawback mentioned by most Practical Sharers was the cost of membership, which aligns with the Health-Conscious Adventurers and Ritualistic Locavores.

Perceived Behavioral Control. The only factor that all Practical Sharers considered essential for successful CSA membership, aside from a searchable recipe repository mentioned by all groups, was having greater variety in the items included in their shares. Paul clearly illustrated how the lack of variety can be a barrier to continued participation when he said, "It was a bit monotonous after eight weeks. There were three weeks in a row where I got cabbage, brussels sprouts, and carrots. It was those same three over and over again. … It got hard to be creative."

Normative Beliefs. Social networks influenced joining for this subgroup, with all Practical Sharers noting that a friend was the reason they were introduced to their CSA. However, the Practical Sharers were the only group in which less than a majority of members (20%) expressed a desire to encourage others to join. This is not surprising given that most were not current CSA members. Like the Sustainable Agricultural Advocates, most Practical Sharers (60%) split their shares with others. Almost all Practical Sharers (80%) had former connections with agriculture, serving as a positive influence on their willingness to join a CSA. David emphasized this point when he said, "I helped on my grandpa's farm a little, so you know fresh food's the best food."

The Ideal Share. All Practical Sharers expressed the need for effective communication with CSA operators as a component of their ideal shares. Most Practical Sharers (60%) preferred social media, such as Instagram or Facebook, as their primary source for CSA-related information. Karen said that having a "group social media page where people share recipes and how they use things would be so much fun." All Practical Sharers expressed a desire for more variety in their ideal share. Other features mentioned by most Practical Sharers (60%) included convenience and social connections. Notably, the Practical Sharers are the only subgroup with a majority of members identi-

fying social connections as an important aspect of their ideal share.

Together, these subgroups and their differing characteristics and behaviors illustrate that socially motivated CSA members vary substantially in how they balance community, convenience, and practical constraints.

Discussion

Findings from this study align with prior research on key factors influencing CSA participation. Convenience remains a crucial factor for obtaining and maintaining CSA membership (Galt et al., 2019). In this study, all but one participant reported that pickup logistics were compatible with their daily routines. Similarly, most participants emphasized the need for sufficient cooking skills to successfully utilize the contents of the share. Although prior research suggests that CSA participation can support the development of cooking knowledge and self-efficacy (Hanson et al., 2017; Horning et al., 2021; White et al., 2018), our findings demonstrate that having a strong foundation of cooking skills is essential to CSA member success. Participants with prior experience with meal-kit services highlighted that meal kits may better support cooking skill development than CSAs do. This aligns with previous research that posits meal kits as being popular among those who lack cooking knowledge and skills (Yoon et al., 2022). One way that participants in our study felt they could overcome their lack of culinary skills was by using the recipes provided with their shares. Nearly all participants emphasized the importance of an accessible, searchable recipe repository to support the utilization of CSA shares.

This study also identified underexplored dimensions of CSA participation, including alignment with health conditions and the practice of share-splitting. Participants described managing conditions such as rheumatoid arthritis, celiac disease, hypertension, gallstones, and diabetes through increased intake of fruits and vegetables and reduced consumption of fats and processed foods. These experiences were primarily reported among Health-Conscious Adventurers and Sustainable Agricultural Advocates. Share-splitting emerged as a strategy among some participants, particularly Sustainable Agricultural Advocates and Practical Sharers. The practice was primarily used to manage excess volume of produce and reduce food waste.

The primary contribution of this study lies in the identification of distinct CSA member typologies through cluster analysis. While prior research identified common motivations for CSA participation, our findings demonstrate that these motivations are not uniformly distributed across participants. For example, although health is widely cited as a driver of local food purchasing (Adams & Adams, 2011; Bond et al., 2008; Thilmany et al., 2008), only the Health-Conscious Adventurers consistently emphasized health outcomes. In contrast, not a single member of the Ritualistic Locavores mentioned health as a benefit of CSA membership. In addition, Health-Conscious Adventurers prioritized having predictable staple items, whereas the Sustainable Agricultural Advocates preferred more variety in their shares. By identifying both shared characteristics and distinct member typologies, this study provides a foundation for targeted CSA program design and marketing. These insights can inform tailored strategies to improve member engagement, satisfaction, and retention. These findings demonstrate that CSA participation is shaped not by a single set of motivations, but by distinct member profiles that require different forms of support.

Limitations

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting these findings. First, the qualitative design and a relatively small sample size limit generalizability. The typologies reflect patterns observed among the interviewees and provide exploratory insight rather than generalizable conclusions. Future research with larger and more diverse samples is needed to further examine and validate these patterns and to assess their applicability across broader CSA populations.

Second, variation across CSA programs may have influenced participant experiences. Participants represented multiple CSA programs that differed in share size, products offered, logistics, and cost. As a result, the findings may not capture the full range of CSA experiences. Characteristics of individual CSA programs should be considered

when interpreting and applying the results of this study.

Finally, the cluster analysis is based on similarity in thematic codes, which requires interpretive judgment. This introduces a potential for bias, as researchers' determinations of which codes and characteristics are most salient in the interpretation may reflect underlying assumptions. To strengthen rigor, the prevalence of codes within each typology was examined to identify dominant characteristics.

Recommendations for Practice

Based on these findings, the following recommendations aim to improve CSA membership experience, enhance member retention, and increase overall membership.

The importance of convenience, specifically regarding pickup logistics, was nearly universal. CSAs should offer flexible pickup options, including multiple locations, days, and time slots to accommodate varying schedules. Home delivery may further enhance accessibility.

A searchable recipe repository was identified as an essential component of successful CSA models. To help members use the contents of their shares, CSAs should provide digital recipe databases with recipes that align with the seasonal offerings. A recipe repository may be viewed as more helpful because it allows members to select from a variety of recipes. This enables them to find recipes that align with their taste preferences and dietary needs in a way that individual recipes included with a share may not. Cooking tips and skill-building resources should accompany recipes to support share utilization.

To increase CSA participation, CSA programs might consider tailoring shares and advertising to distinct member types identified in this study. For the Health-Conscious Adventurers, CSAs might provide health-focused messaging and recipes aligned with dietary goals and specific health conditions. For the Ritualistic Locavores, consistency is an important characteristic of their CSA membership. To cater to this type, farms can emphasize consistency in pickup logistics and share contents. Additionally, if feasible, farms can provide advance notice of changes to the expected produce in their weekly shares. Sustainable farming practices and supporting the environment were unique benefits valued by the Sustainable Agricultural Advocates. CSAs could benefit by highlighting sustainability practices and providing guidance on reducing food waste.

Social influences on CSA membership were particularly strong for the Sustainable Agricultural Advocates. They were the only group with all members expressing a desire to encourage others to join. Farms can leverage this strong social motivation through referral incentives. CSAs could offer referral discounts or other incentives for members who recruit new members, benefiting both the member and the farm. Sustainable Agricultural Advocates were also the only group with all members reporting travel-related challenges. CSAs could offer share holds or allow others to pick up shares during members' absences. Lastly, customization was a key preference shared by all the Sustainable Agricultural Advocates. CSAs can address this by allowing members to swap items or select certain produce options.

The Practical Sharers highly value communication. Most members of this group preferred social media as their main source of CSA information. CSAs should prioritize clear communication, particularly through social media platforms, to support engagement.

Conclusions

CSAs provide an opportunity to connect consumers with locally grown produce and promote positive outcomes, including improved cooking skills and increased fruit and vegetable consumption. This study examined how attitudes, social influences, and perceived behavioral control of current and former CSA members shape their experiences with CSA programs. While participants shared common baseline needs, the relevance of key factors varied across distinct member typologies. These findings suggest that CSA participation is not driven by a single set of motivations, but by distinct member profiles requiring targeted strategies to improve engagement and retention. Future research should further test and refine these typologies across diverse CSA contexts and populations.



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Appendix A. Interview Guide

1. Tell me about your experience with being a CSA member.
   Follow-up: Have you been a member at more than one farm?
   If more than 1 farm: Did you change farms or add an additional farm?
   If change: Why did you change farms? Were there differences between your experiences with the farms?
2. Why did you originally join a CSA?
   Probes: What outcomes did you think it would have? Why did those motivate you to join?
   Probes for current CSA members: Why have you continued your membership? Did it have the outcomes (advantages/positive consequences) that you expected? Were there other outcomes you did not anticipate?
3. Are any people who are important to you—like friends or family—CSA members?
   3.1: How do you think that fact affected your becoming (or remaining a member)?
   3.2: Is this how you found out about the CSA?
   If not, where did you learn about the CSA(s) you joined?
4. Tell me about how the CSA fits in (or fit in, for people who aren't current CSA members) with your lifestyle.
   Probes: Tell me how you acquire(d) your CSA share? Where and on what days did you receive it? How did/does that fit in with your day-to-day activities and responsibilities?
   Tell me about how you like to cook or what your approach or strategies are for mealtimes?
   Do you have any constraints on your cooking (e.g., dietary limitations, children, work)? If so, can you tell me about how those constraints affect your purchasing or cooking?
5. How does (or did) purchasing a CSA compare with other ways of receiving food?
   5.1 What are the primary benefits/advantages of the CSA?
   5.2 What are the disadvantages?
   Probes: Where or how else do you acquire food?
   Have you ever used grocery delivery like Instacart? What do you see as the benefits of grocery delivery?
   Have you ever used a meal-kit service, such as Hello Fresh, before? What do you think the primary advantages and disadvantages of those services are?
   Probe: Do you still order meal-kits? Why or why not?
6. In your experience, how easy/difficult was it to acquire your box and use its contents? Were there specific things that you found especially difficult to deal with?
7. Is there something that would have helped make it easier or more beneficial for you?
   Probe for logistics of box acquisition: Are there ways that the box pickup (time, location, frequency, delivery) could have been simplified for you?
8. What kinds of knowledge, resources or skills would have helped you to use the contents of your box?
9. Do you (or did you) feel like you have the resources—such as time, money, cooking skills—to easily maintain a CSA membership?
10. What kinds of things could the farm have done to make it easier or more beneficial for you?
11. To conclude, given everything we have talked about, if you could create a perfect CSA membership—setting aside cost, farmer limitations—what would it be like?
    Probes: How would you receive your share? What would be in the box? What resources would it have?
    Probe: Where would you like to hear about this perfect CSA box (friends, family, social media, influencer, etc.)

Appendix B. Table of Characteristics by Type

Name	Type	Current CSA Member	Future CSA Member	Grocery Delivery	Meal-Kit User	Employment Status	Living Arrangement	Children in Household	Food Assistance (Past 12 Months)	Gender	Education Level	Age Category
John	1	Yes	NA	Yes	Yes	Unemployed	Married/domestic partner	No	No	Male	Graduate or professional degree	50–59
Linda	1	No	Yes	Yes	No	Stay-at-home parent	Married/domestic partner	Yes	Yes	Female	Associate's degree	30–39
Susan	1	Yes	NA	Yes	No	Caregiver	Other	No	No	Female	Graduate or professional degree	60–69
Anna	1	Yes	NA	Yes	Yes	Work full time	Married/domestic partner	No	No	Female	Graduate or professional degree	30–39
Luke	1	Yes	NA	No	No	Work full time	Married/domestic partner	No	No	Male	Graduate or professional degree	50–59
Erin	1	Yes	NA	Yes	No	Work part time	Married/domestic partner	No	No	Female	Graduate or professional degree	30–39
Laura	1	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Work part time	Married/domestic partner	No	Yes	Female	Associate's degree	18–29
Rachel	2.1	Yes	NA	Yes	Yes	Work full time	Married/domestic partner	Yes	No	Female	Graduate or professional degree	30–39
Hannah	2.1	Yes	NA	Yes	Yes	Work full time	Married/domestic partner	No	No	Female	Graduate or professional degree	18–29
Peter	2.1	Yes	NA	Yes	Yes	Work full time	Married/domestic partner	No	No	Male	Bachelor's degree	18–29
Emily	2.2	Yes	NA	Yes	Yes	Work full time	Married/domestic partner	Yes	No	Female	Graduate or professional degree	30–39
Jessica	2.2	Yes	NA	Yes	No	Retired	Live alone	No	No	Female	Bachelor's degree	70 or older
Jane	2.2	No	No	No	No	Work full time	Live alone	No	No	Female	Graduate or professional degree	60–69
Amy	2.3	Yes	NA	No	No	Work full time	Married/domestic partner	Yes	No	Female	Graduate or professional degree	40–49

Paul	2.3	No	No	No	No	Student	Married/domestic partner	Yes	No	Male	Bachelor's degree	30–39
Karen	2.3	No	No	No	Yes	Student	Married/domestic partner	Yes	No	Female	Graduate or professional degree	30–39
Michelle	2.3	No	Yes	No	No	Work full time	Other	Yes	Yes	Female	Graduate or professional degree	30–39
David	2.3	No	Yes	No	No	Work full time	Live alone	No	No	Male	Bachelor's degree	30–39