

# Navigating the tensions and agreements in alternative food and sustainability: a convention theoretical perspective on alternative food retail

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**Abstract** Concerns about the unsustainability of the conventional food system have promoted interest in alternative food networks (AFNs), which are typically conceptualized through their differences from conventional food networks. Real-life AFNs, however, tend to show some similarities to the conventional food system. This hybridity has caused some criticism, but also, increasingly, calls for a more open examination of AFNs. Indeed, AFNs can be seen as relational to and shaped by the prevailing food system, for example the expectations the conventional system has promoted among consumers. In this paper, through a multiple case study of nine alternative food retailers, we examine the negotiation of acceptable practice in AFNs and the challenges encountered in trying to do things alternatively. We employ convention theory, which encourages a view of action as socially negotiated and situational, and acknowledges plural legitimate notions of worth in guiding and justifying actions. Our findings show a plurality of ideals in the domain of AFNs and a complex navigation between the retailers' own expressed ideals and considerations and perceived consumer expectations. The retailers' justification of actions highlights several areas of tension in AFN practice, helping also to understand the challenges in adopting sustainable practices. While responding to consumer expectations sometimes involved adopting more conventional practices, the retailers also challenged consumers on certain issues. Our findings also

show how even market-oriented AFNs may take radically alternative courses of action. The study supports the broader argument for examining all food networks in an open way, focusing on actual sustainability outcomes.

**Keywords** Alternative food networks · Justification · Food retail · Convention theory · Hybridity · Sustainability

## Abbreviations

AFN Alternative food network  
CT Convention theory

## Introduction

Food provisioning arrangements known as alternative food networks (AFN), encompassing forms as diverse as farmers' markets, community supported agriculture, fair trade and specialist food retail (Renting et al. 2003), have gained in popularity as a response to the sustainability issues associated with the conventional food system (e.g., Seyfang 2006; Cleveland et al. 2015; Forssell and Lankoski 2015). Accordingly, conceptualizations of AFNs have emphasized their differences from conventional food networks. AFNs are conceptualized through notions of small scale, localness and a rejection of the industrial logic of the conventional food system. Food is provisioned locally or through short supply chains and food production methods are different from those in the conventional system, for example more ecological. AFN participants are also often seen as having altruistic or sustainability-related values and goals (for reviews, see Forssell and Lankoski 2015; Tregear 2011).

However, real-life AFNs tend not to fully correspond to such descriptions. They often exhibit hybridity in their

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practices and structures (e.g., Ilbery and Maye 2005a, b; Mount 2012; Nost 2014), meaning that they have some similar practices to conventional actors or their value chains may overlap with those of conventional food networks. AFN actors may also have less sustainability-focused motives than perhaps thought (e.g., Hinrichs 2000, 2003; Ilbery and Maye 2005b). Accompanying the sense of promise linked to AFNs have, then, been debates over what to make of these “disappointing realities” (Tregear 2011, p. 425) and what is sufficiently alternative to constitute a force that challenges the unsustainable mainstream food system.

Proposals for making sense of these discrepancies have included conceptualizations of AFNs as placed on continuums or in categories of weak(er) and strong(er) (Watts et al. 2005), corporate and local (Follett 2009), market-based and community-based (Gregory and Gregory 2010) on the basis of their vulnerability to assimilation into the conventional, the range of sustainability issues they address or on what the underlying motives and values are seen to be. However, this overall narrative of the food system dividing into a binary conventional/alternative and within the alternative, into more/less alternative, is increasingly challenged in the literature. It is thought to limit understanding of AFNs and how they might evolve. Rosin and Campbell (2009, p. 45) express caution against framing food networks as “either alternative and good, or not wholly alternative and bad”. Tregear (2011, p. 425) warns against the tendency to overlook those AFNs not appearing to have the right alternative values, practices or outcomes, as “imperfect and ‘outlying’” and argues that in doing so “reasons why some AFNs, in reality, pursue apparently unjust goals may ... go unexplained beyond initial judgements”.

AFNs can in fact be seen as situated squarely within the wider food system and necessarily influenced by it. As Mount (2012, p. 111) argues,

engagement within an alternative food system does not exempt participants from the influences of wider systems and relationships that provide the context for ... decision making and governance. ... [A]lternative social networks are ... embedded within material conditions shaped by the economic and discursive dominance of conventional systems.

Thus, hybridity in AFNs may stem from various material constraints or economic imperatives (Ilbery and Maye 2005b)—and related to this, the pressure of established norms, understandings and expectations among consumers. Indeed, there have been calls for considering production and consumption as relational (e.g., Holloway et al. 2007; Lockie and Kitto 2000) and to pay more attention to the role of consumption in AFNs (e.g., Tregear 2011; Cox

et al. 2008) to better understand AFN dynamics. Consumers are also participants to AFNs, and their expectations and preferences will also shape AFNs. For example, Nost (2014) found consumer expectations to lead to hybrid practices in Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) schemes. The conventional food system has systematically promoted ideals such as low cost, convenience and a predictable, abundant year-round supply of foods (Mount 2012; Harvey et al. 2004; Dixon 2007; Maxey 2006). Studies of consumers in AFNs have suggested that consumers consider these aspects also when engaging in AFNs (e.g., Hinrichs 2000; Seyfang 2008; McEachern et al. 2010; Pole and Gray 2013). Thus, attempts to do things differently in AFNs might meet with resistance and compromises may have to be made. After all, without the acceptance of enough consumers, an AFN will not survive—and cannot contribute to sustainability in the food system.

In sum, there is a need to consider AFNs in an open way, acknowledging the dialogue between different participants that guides AFN practice, as well as the tensions involved in trying to do things differently from the conventional system. To strengthen this view on AFNs and allow for an open and situational perspective of actions and their rationale, we employ convention theory in this paper. Convention theory is a sociological economic theory focusing on the negotiated interchange between actors in coordinating economic action. Its particular usefulness for this study lies in its situational perspective—the examination of actions chosen and justified so as to be acceptable in specific situations, rather than actors having fixed dispositions (Boltanski and Thévenot 1991/2006). Practices and outcomes are seen to be shaped through an ongoing process of negotiation (Rosin and Campbell 2009). Thus, we can see the actions and decisions of AFN actors as also reflecting perceived stakeholder expectations and not only their own aims, preferences and ideals. Further, analyzing the situations in which actions require justification allows us to identify tensions in the field (Raynolds 2002). Finally, convention theory suggests a plurality of legitimate ideals upon which agreements can be based (Boltanski and Thévenot 1991/2006), further breaking down binary views of alternative and conventional food networks.

In this paper we examine retailers, the juncture where interaction between food production and consumption tangibly takes place. We use the term ‘alternative food retailer’ to designate independent retailers of organic, local or specialty foods. Retailers are a relatively overlooked alternative food network actor (Ilbery and Maye 2006), yet they can have an important facilitator role in AFNs. They provide a marketing channel for small producers and a low-threshold way for consumers to participate in AFNs. They also have the potential to guide consumers toward more

sustainable food choices through curating a selection that is sustainable and mediating information about the sustainability of food. This can be useful for consumers who lack time and energy to deliberate every purchase (Johnston and Szabo 2011). Examining retailers is fruitful as they represent a commercial or market-based type of AFN, have direct knowledge of consumer expectations and particular pressures to meet them, and have to make many decisions in managing a whole selection of products. The examination of retailers' navigation in the food system also provides clues about the established norms and understandings among consumers. We approach our inquiry through a qualitative, multiple case study of nine alternative food retailers in Finland and the UK.

Thus, the key research question that we set out to examine in this paper is: How do alternative food retailers navigate their way through various considerations and perceived expectations at the interface between food production and consumption and what does this reveal of AFNs' potential to contribute to sustainability?

We use Boltanski and Thévenot's (1991/2006) convention theoretical 'worlds of justification' framework in our analysis. The worlds of justification represent different legitimate notions of worth, or what is in line with the greater good. The conventions related to them act as guides for, and as tools for the legitimation of, action. We approach our research question by examining empirically i) how alternative food retailers employ different worlds of justification to position themselves in the market and justify practices and ii) what practices in particular are subject to justification. Taking the convention theoretical view, the existence of justification (and of the tensions it reveals) is a sign of hybridity in the network. In a wholly alternative food network, we would expect to see only alternative practices and conventions among all network participants, and thus the acting out of these networks would be seamless; there would be little need for justification. In this paper, we are exploring the hybridity in alternative food networks and thus looking for the plurality of conventions and practices, the tensions that occur as a result and how consumer-facing AFN actors respond to these tensions. This in turn helps understand what kinds of practices might be adopted and what not, and thus also understand AFNs' potential for challenging the conventional food system and contributing to sustainability.

The paper is structured as follows. We start by introducing convention theory and outlining how it can frame the analysis of actors' navigation between different considerations and expectations. We then outline the qualitative methodology of the study and describe the retailers studied and their context. We follow this with the presentation of findings. These show that alternative retailers draw on a broad set of ideals in positioning themselves, and

that they appear to encounter many tensions as they navigate among perceived, sometimes contradictory, consumer expectations and their own expressed aims, ideals and principles. Sometimes this navigation involves making compromises, yet the retailers also defend certain practices and challenge the conventional food system and unsustainable food consumption, particularly the norms of low price and abundant choice of foods. We follow with a discussion of consumer expectations, the plurality of ideals in AFN and the constructive nature of the dialogue between food network participants, and end with conclusions.

## Convention theory

Convention theory (CT) is a sociological economic approach to examining social behavior and economic exchange, also applied to studies of the changing agri-food sector. It emerged starting in the 1970s and was developed particularly by French scholars (Dosse 1999), among them Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot whose concept of 'worlds of justification' (1991/2006) we will use in this paper. CT examines how actors engage with plural conventions, or shared rules and norms, in coordinating economic exchange (Wilkinson 1997; Raynolds 2002; Biggart and Beamish 2003). Conventions coalesce around different 'orders of worth', or coherent notions of the common good (Boltanski and Thévenot 1991/2006).

The developers of CT set out to challenge prevailing theories of economic behavior, both those leaning on the notion of the rational economic actor acting in isolation from others (the position of methodological individualism), and those theories that saw the individual as largely powerless and guided by the pressure of social structures (Diaz-Bone 2011). CT posits instead that active, constructive processes of negotiation among competent actors guide economic and social exchange (Diaz-Bone 2011; Rosin and Campbell 2009), painting a picture of economic actors as both shaped by and themselves strategically shaping shared understandings of worth in different situations to ensure their interests (Raynolds 2002; Rosin and Campbell 2009).

Conventions are tools for the external *positioning of actors and legitimation of actions* (Ponte and Gibbon 2005; Rosin 2007). Actors may emphasize their actions' alignment with specific conventions that they estimate to resonate in a given situation, or they may appeal to such conventions to justify something that may be controversial or unacceptable. Justification links a situation of disagreement to an area of agreement. The notion of justification central to CT implies the possibility of criticism (Boltanski and Thevenot 2000), which in the context of food retail might be customers not accepting a certain

practice or characteristic of the retailer. Examining justifications thus “strengthens our understanding of tensions as well as agreements within agro-food networks” (Raynolds 2002, p. 409). Due to the *constructive*, shaping aspect of negotiations among social actors, the tensions and agreements in a food system are also open to change.

Conventions are also a way for actors to make sense of situations (Nyberg and Wright 2013) and *guides for action* (Ponte and Gibbon 2005; Biggart and Beamish 2003). In the ongoing efforts to maintain their position, actors choose courses of action that are acceptable and in line with the expectations of the other party (Thévenot 2002), ones they estimate as “likely to result in fiscal and social gain” (Biggart and Beamish 2003, p.444). Conventions also enable “people to move forward without actively calculating and defending each action” (Biggart and Beamish 2003, p. 456). Thus, conventions may be implicit and taken-for-granted, acting as heuristics.

A key framework in CT are the worlds of justification developed by Boltanski and Thévenot (1991/2006), drawing on works of political philosophy such as those of Rousseau and Adam Smith. These worlds are based on different principles and display different orders of worth for humans and objects (objects, in this context, could be the food products valorized in a given case). The worlds all present a particular view of what is important and in line with the greater good (Rosin and Campbell 2009). Boltanski and Thévenot’s classification originally included six worlds: civic (based on the principle of benefit to society), market (price, competitiveness), industrial (efficiency, standardization), domestic (tradition, embeddedness, trust), renown (public opinion, recognition, brand), inspiration (creativity, uniqueness, achieving happiness) (Boltanski and Thévenot 1991/2006) but the worlds are emergent and thus not limited to these six. As an example, a green world of justification has been elaborated to account for conventions that place particular worth on nature (Thévenot et al. 2000).

Importantly, actors can adhere to more than one world of justification and move between the worlds when acting and defending their actions in the public sphere—indeed, often they must, to meet the requirements of the situation at hand and the orders of worth that are appropriate to it. Boltanski and Thévenot (1991/2006) challenge the notion of fixed dispositions, i.e., of actors acting out “by means of a programme inscribed in people in advance... no matter what situation is confronted” (p. 216). Rather than viewing different notions of worth as static principles, the focus of interest for Boltanski and Thévenot is the deployment of notions of worth in *actual situations* with their particular circumstances (1991/2006).

In the event of disputes and tensions, or what Boltanski and Thévenot (1991/2006) call ‘critical moments’, actors

must justify their views and actions. This can take three forms: (1) clarification, i.e., agreeing with the validity of the world in question, but clarifying why the elements of the criticism are not valid; (2) denunciation, i.e., introducing another world to measure the worthiness of the action instead; or (3) a compromise, where elements from multiple worlds are balanced to reach an understanding.

In agri-food studies, CT has often been applied to examinations of quality and the quality turn in food, examining the emergence of market niches based on indicators of quality such as place of production, ethics and ecological production (e.g., Raynolds 2002; Barham 2002; Renard 2003; Parrott et al. 2002); to categorisation of agri-food company strategies (Murdoch and Miele 1999; 2004a) and to examinations of the negotiation of quality conventions among food network actors (Ponte and Gibbon 2005; Kirwan 2006) (for a thorough review see Ponte 2016). Often, agri-food studies have associated the civic, green and domestic worlds of justification with the alternative domain and market and industrial worlds with the conventional (for reviews, see Rosin and Campbell 2009; Ponte 2016). Rosin and Campbell (2009) however see this dualism as reinforcing the framing of AFNs and the conventional food system in a binary manner. They also observe that analyses in agri-food studies tend to focus on a limited number of worlds of justification, typically overlooking the renown and inspiration worlds, which may equally be significant (see also Ponte 2016). As Ponte (2016, p. 19–20) suggests in his review of CT studies within the agri-food field, one of the emerging new directions is acknowledging actors’ engagement with multiple worlds, demonstrating a “plurality of moral orders“. If used in this more holistic way demonstrated by for example Murdoch and Miele (2004a) and Rosin and Campbell (2009), CT can be useful precisely for transcending the binary view and instead exploring the diversity and hybridity of the sector.

Criticisms toward CT more generally have mainly concerned the method for developing the worlds of justification—drawing from works of political philosophy—but the worlds have been found to account well in practice for actual justifications in use (Rosin 2007). In other words, a person who has never read for example Rousseau may still embrace ideals such as justice and equality. Another criticism, pertinent also to this study, is that CT lacks in normative direction due to the view that all worlds of justification are legitimate (see Rosin and Campbell 2009). This has implications for questions of change in the food system, and we will return to this in the discussion.

The core principles of CT make it highly useful for this study. First, it departs from the position of methodological individualism, i.e., the view that “there are only individuals, their aims and decisions as explaining principles (for action)” (Diaz-Bone 2011, p. 50). Instead, it focuses on the

social interaction between capable actors in coordinating action. Second, the notion of public justification in CT enables an examination of the expectations and notions of worth in the field of AFNs—what is, or is perceived to be, considered as desirable and right. As the focus is on public justification, CT also takes an agnostic view of the inner values or motives of actors (Dequech 2008). Third, CT focuses on situations, rather than actors' innate characteristics, rejecting the view that actors have fixed dispositions. Finally, it recognizes a plurality of legitimate ideals and rationalities for coordinating action (Diaz-Bone 2011).

## Data and methods

For a convention theoretical study, study data is required in which the actors themselves express and explain their views and actions. Examining many sources of data related to the different retailers is also helpful in gaining a rich picture of their positioning and justification in different situations. Thus, a case study approach is suitable and we have approached the topic with an instrumental multiple case study strategy (Stake 2006), covering altogether nine case companies. Business enterprises are considered to be a particularly fruitful subject for CT studies as they face tensions between different orders of worth (Patriotta et al. 2011). In this case, there might be tensions between the sustainability-related expectations typically linked to the sector and the commercial considerations linked to running a business.

In the mainstream food system, there is generally increasing concentration of power in the hands of ever fewer retailers. The empirical focus of this study is on two Northern European countries, Finland and the United Kingdom, which represent this type of context where specialty retail is marginal and the supermarket mode of food shopping dominates. These particular countries were chosen based on the researchers' familiarity with the country contexts, including language and culture. Both countries have a concentrated retail sector. In the UK, the four largest retailers controlled 72.3 per cent of the food and groceries market as of June 2015 (Statista 2015), whereas in Finland the concentration is even greater: the two largest retailers controlled 78.8 per cent of the market in 2014 (Finnish Grocery Trade Association 2015). However, independent retailers' popularity and significance is estimated to be growing as consumers look for alternatives to supermarkets (e.g., Andrew 2014; Soil Association 2015).

For the purposes of this study, alternative food retailers are defined as retailers independent from large retail chains and with an externally discernible specialty profile. The product selection is centered on organic, local or regional

foods, foods from small producers or other specialty foods. We iteratively selected cases of alternative food retail that represented variety in terms of the size, age, type and location of the retail business. The businesses ranged from operations run by two people to ones with several hundred employees; from ones that had started out a year or two ago to ones that had operated for more than 25 years. They included both bricks and mortar shops and online shops with home deliveries, and both rural and urban businesses. The aim of selecting diverse businesses for study was that the common patterns found illuminate the "central, shared dimensions of a phenomenon" (Patton 2002, p. 235). It also aimed at making the findings more robust and balanced. The UK context provided larger and older businesses for study, as in Finland the businesses were often quite small and recently established. Table 1 gives an overview of the characteristics and activities of the retailers, showing the range of product line emphases, supply chains and the scope of food sourcing as well as different shop formats.

The data used consist of written materials produced by the retailers, for example content from websites and social media, and data from semi-structured interviews (typically with the business founder and owner; in two cases, with senior management), all in all resulting in over 500 pages of material. In collecting the written data, we paid particular attention to communications about policies and practices adopted within the business and how these are justified, as well as to commentary on topics related to food, food policy or the conventional food system. The interviews, conducted by the first author (SF) between February 2012 and September 2014, included exploring the starting of the business, how respondents wish to develop it, what they feel is going well and what could be improved; as well as some questions about their operating environment. We particularly explored the more specific themes of product selection, sourcing and logistics in the interviews. We avoided explicitly guiding the discussion to alternativeness, so as not to artificially push the responses in this direction.

We took a theory-guided approach to analyzing case study data, in which existing theory is used to guide the analysis while allowing new avenues of thought and new foci to emerge as the analysis proceeds (Timmermans and Tavory 2012). The guiding questions in the analysis were i) what types of considerations the retailers emphasize as important in and typical to their activities ii) what practices are justified and iii) what kinds of ideals or notions of worth are deployed in processes of positioning and justification, and how this is done. As the study took an open position as to what AFNs are or might become, we were open to the possibility of retailers having alternative *or* conventional considerations or practices, or being faced

**Table 1** Characteristics of the case companies, based on the analytical fields proposed by Holloway et al. (2007)

Analytical field	Range of characteristics exhibited by the case companies
Site of food production	Own farm, local or regional farms, domestic farms, farms in other countries
Food production methods/ product criteria	High quality, organic, free range/animal welfare-friendly, artisanal, fair trade, vegetarian
Supply chain	Selling own production, buying directly from producers, buying from wholesalers and importers
Arena of exchange	Bricks and mortar shop (including one farm shop), home delivery
Producer–consumer interaction	Newsletters, internet sites, video, social media, direct selling, email and telephone, cookery demonstration, stands at events, own restaurant, café
Expressed motives for initiating business	Surviving as food producer, autonomy and control, interest in food, wanting to change the food system, trying out entrepreneurship and employing oneself

with alternative or conventional expectations, in various combinations. We looked for justifications that emerged spontaneously, without prompting from the interviewer (thus, particularly justifications in the written materials were of interest) and noted what potential criticisms the different justifications were in response to. We analyzed the data using both coding and categorizing approaches and more holistic analysis of narrative passages (Maxwell 2012), organizing the material into themes within the frame of seven worlds of justification. We made use of data displays (Miles and Huberman 1994) to facilitate identifying key findings within and across the cases.

## Findings

In this section, we will describe how alternative food retailers navigate between different considerations and perceived consumer expectations. We will first lay the ground by describing how the worlds of justification outlined in convention theoretical literature manifest themselves in the case companies' discourses, and then describe how the retailers engage with these worlds to position themselves in the market, indicating agreements in the sector. We then examine more closely what kinds of practices are justified, to understand where there are potential tensions, as well as examining how the practices are justified.

### *Worlds of justification and positioning of the case companies*

Table 2 draws together descriptions of the worlds of justification from Boltanski and Thevenot's work (1991/2006) and from applications of convention theory in the agri-food literature. The final column describes how the retailers in this study gave expression to the different worlds of justification.

The table paints a multi-faceted picture of the notions of worth at play, encompassing not only civic, domestic and

green worlds of justification, but also for example the market and industrial worlds, which have typically been associated with the conventional food system.

We will first look at how the retailers engaged with these diverse worlds to position themselves within the food system. All of the retailers saw themselves as an alternative to supermarkets, whether in terms of the shopping experience or the quality of products offered, or in terms of sustainability or health aspects, and implicitly or explicitly contrasted their identity and practices to those of supermarkets and the conventional food system in their public-facing communications. Well thought-out positioning appeared crucial in what all of the retailers noted to be a difficult business given for example the dominance of supermarkets and the increasing number of sustainable options available to consumers (including supermarkets' local and organic food offerings). As one retailer put it: "Any given week, any customer can get away very easily with not using our service, that's my slightly dismal take on it (R4).<sup>1</sup> Thus, we see these positions as one manifestation of navigating among diverse considerations, as the retailers sought to create businesses that reflected their own expressed vision and preferences, but also had to think carefully about positioning themselves in a distinctive and appealing way in a competitive market.

As was to be expected in the domain of AFNs, the retailers engaged strongly with the domestic, civic and green worlds of justification in positioning themselves. Related to the *domestic* world, they emphasized localness, small scale, relationships and their personal involvement in the business, and contrasted this to the large, impersonal nature of supermarkets. The majority of the retailers emphasized that their supply chain can be trusted because they know their suppliers. This was reinforced through producer stories and photographs in many of the retailers' communications materials, and contrasted with faceless

<sup>1</sup> Some quotations are translated freely from Finnish. Code in parentheses (e.g., "(R4)") refers to a particular retailer.

**Table 2** Worlds of justification in the literature and the retailers' discourses

World of justification	Descriptions of worth (drawing on Boltanski and Thévenot 1991/ 2006; Thévenot et al. 2000)	Interpretations in agri-food literature (Rosin and Campbell 2009; Murdoch et al. 2000; Renard 2003; Ponte and Gibbon 2005)	Notions of worth expressed by alternative food retailers
Domestic	Importance of relationships Tradition Trustworthiness Honesty Continuity The rejection of selfishness Not taking advantage of the weak	Face to face contact Trust, long-term relationships Brands (as builder of trust) Geographical indications Small scale	Localness, favoring local foods Close relationship with suppliers and customers Personal involvement Trust, honoring promises Honesty, being ethical and fair Small scale Moderation
Civic	The collective Social movement Solidarity Justice Principles, rejecting the dilution of principles	Healthiness of foods Fair Trade	Paying a fair price, helping growers Promoting health through diet, 'food as medicine' Affordability, accessibility to all, rather than elite business Integrity, principles Political activism
Green	Value of nature	Ecological production	Working with nature Protecting the land Protecting biodiversity Importance of animal welfare
Market	Opportunism Self-interest, profit, doing business Success, challenging oneself Competitiveness Price, value Desirable products Luxury	Coordination by price	High quality foods Excellent service Economic considerations Being quick and flexible Challenging oneself
Industrial	Scientific methods Technology Efficiency, productivity Professionalism, reliability Work, achievement Control Standardization	Standardized products Third-party certification	Hard work, achievements Criticism of incompetence, laziness Importance of professionalism of suppliers Control of the supply chain Certification, third-party approval Consistent (but not uniform) quality Scientific proof
Renown	Recognition, visibility Reputation Opinion leader Brand	Third party endorsement	Awards and recognition Brand building

**Table 2** continued

World of justification	Descriptions of worth (drawing on Boltanski and Thévenot 1991/ 2006; Thévenot et al. 2000)	Interpretations in agri-food literature (Rosin and Campbell 2009; Murdoch et al. 2000; Renard 2003; Ponte and Gibbon 2005)	Notions of worth expressed by alternative food retailers
Inspiration	Emotions, passion, enthusiasm Spontaneity, creativity Rejection of habits, norms Independence Risk, adventure	Creativity	Autonomy Freedom from the corporate world Emotional arguments Life-affirming Aesthetics of sustainability

supermarkets with their long, complex supply chains. The idea communicated was that their food is ‘known’ and safe. There were also many references made to the 2013 meat contamination scandal, ‘horsegate’. Thus, the retailers not only offered reassurance about their own offering, but actively fed a mistrust toward the conventional food system. Finally, moderation was a domestic world ideal embraced through encouragement to buy only what one needs and not waste food.

In terms of engagement with the *civic* world of justification, almost all of the retailers explicitly expressed a commitment to paying a fair price to suppliers and helping them. There were also references to principles of fair trade when sourcing imported foods. Honoring promises and being ethical were emphasized, and supermarkets were often criticized for exploiting their suppliers. Another prominent civic world emphasis was on the healthiness of the foods sold, expressed by all but one retailer (whose core offering was meat products), and many expressed a personal interest in a healthier diet and a wish to promote this awareness as well as making healthy food available to more people as one of the reasons for starting the business.

...we did have a political agenda...we saw ourselves as a movement that had an opposition to the food industry as it was at that time, and we saw ourselves in quite clear contrast with conventional dietary habits and food selling techniques. (R5)

The *green* world was deployed in the expression of a commitment to environmental sustainability by almost all of the retailers. Of those who sell animal products, almost all expressed that animal welfare is an important consideration in sourcing. Sustainability credentials were in a few cases reinforced through a mention of ethical business awards received by the retailer (renown world).

The retailers also engaged with the *market* and *industrial* worlds of justification, more commonly linked to the conventional food system. First of all, engaging the market world of justification, all retailers emphasized the high

quality of the foods offered, not surprising in the field of specialty retail. The offering was often contrasted with the tasteless, ‘bulk’ foods sold in supermarkets, and healthiness was an integral part of the notion of quality. Some also strengthened claims of high quality through referring to quality awards won, thus engaging with the renown world of justification. The market world of justification was also engaged as the retailers talked about responding to consumer demand for more sustainable food through their business.

A perhaps more unexpected deployment of the market and industrial worlds was the emphasis on excellence and the challenging of conventional food system actors in this regard. Much value was placed on hard work and entrepreneurial flair. Over half of the retailers talked about entrepreneurial drivers for starting the business (e.g., a constant drive to challenge themselves). A similar portion of the retailers also expressed frustration at the laziness or inefficiency of others, be it business partners who don’t pull their weight, suppliers who aren’t professional or other entrepreneurs who don’t recognize market opportunities. A few of the retailers also painted a picture of supermarkets as not only misusing their power, but as lazy, incompetent and not responsive to real consumer wishes:

I don’t think [the unfair sourcing practices] even necessarily results in the cheapest lettuce or whatever. I think there are probably better ways of doing business. The other thing about it is that [...] they weren’t even giving the customer what they wanted, you know, for years. The customer wanted to know where the stuff comes from. They hate all the packaging. And they’ve been selling [...] you know, tasteless vegetables that just look uniform and made in a factory. (R7)

Finally, the inspiration world came through strongly in the retailers’ positioning. There was a sense of playfulness and great importance placed on autonomy and on things being fun, “life-affirming” (R4) and “emotionally



satisfying” (R7). There was a widespread dislike for corporate style. One retailer summarized these sentiments in the interview:

Doing what I do is a way of avoiding things I don't want to do. Like wearing a suit. It sounds trivial but it's very important to me, what that symbolizes. To be in charge, doing [...] something you believe in. (R5)

The inspiration world was also reflected in how the ideal food shopping experience was framed, with criticisms of boring, “soulless” supermarkets and an emphasis on how food shopping and preparation should be enjoyable and inspiring. A few retailers also drew on ‘romantic’ verbal and visual imagery of sustainable farming (Marsden 2004).

The retailers’ positioning within the market thus reaches across a broad range of worlds of justification, not only those typically associated with the sphere of AFNs. While the domestic, civic and green worlds were deployed prominently, as expected, the retailers also drew on market and industrial world ideals, for example framing the retailers not as hippies or marginal, but as competent businesspeople, responding to a consumer demand for more sustainable food and challenging the conventional system. The renown world was also engaged in highlighting awards and media attention received by the retailers. Also, the inspiration world—the sense of creativity, playfulness and enjoyment that was emphasized by the retailers—has typically been overlooked in conceptualizations of AFNs in the literature (see Forssell and Lankoski 2015, p. 65–67); raised mainly by Murdoch and Miele (2004b) and Thompson and Coskuner-Balli (2007). The retailers’ ideals and considerations also appeared open to change: some retailers described a growing personal awareness of food sustainability issues through their engagement in the sector.

### *Areas of tension*

We will now turn to examining the tensions the retailers face in attempting to offer an alternative to supermarkets. In this section, we will focus on what practices and decisions the retailers seek to justify, how, and what worlds of justification they engage in doing this. If we take seriously the notion that justification always implies the possibility of criticism (Boltanski and Thévenot 2000), these findings will suggest where the retailers believe they are going against consumer expectations (critical moments) and thus demonstrate the tensions in the domain of AFNs.

As shown in Table 3, the objects of justification fall into two categories: justifying doing things *differently* from the conventional food system and justifying doing things *similarly* to the conventional system. The former includes

higher prices, various forms of inconvenience to the consumer, and products not adhering to certain ideas of food quality, while the latter especially came across in justifying the selling of imported foods and, to a lesser extent, sourcing non-organic foods and using packaging. Similarly to the retailers’ positioning, the justification of any given practice involved engagement with various worlds. Justification can appear as positive arguments and position statements, or as criticisms of opposing views (Thévenot et al. 2000). Thus, the retailers both highlighted the positive aspects of their practices and contrasted this with, or otherwise expressed criticisms of, conventional food system practices.

Higher food prices (or perceptions thereof)<sup>2</sup> appeared to be a particular critical moment. All of the retailers appeared to sense this criticism from consumers in some way and some of them also explicitly brought it up in the interviews. The effort the retailers put into explaining why organic is better (for health, for the environment) can also be seen as a reflection of this issue. One approach was denunciation where the retailers rejected the ideal of low prices (which originates from the industrial world) and invoked other worlds instead. The identification of the criticism as stemming from the industrial world was signaled by words such as “cheap” and “bulk”. The retailers argued that we should respect and value food and its producers and not run after the lowest price (domestic world); appealed to ecological, ethical and health aspects (civic and green worlds), educating consumers on the links between these aspects and food price; argued that the price of food is a reflection of its high quality (market world); and suggested that we should eat better and that food is an integral part of the good life (inspiration world).

The perceived criticism of higher prices from consumers may also be seen to reflect civic world concerns. The retailers signaled their recognition of this aspect through expressions such as “affordable”, “not elitist” and “normal people”. Here, the retailers employed the tactic of clarification. They agreed with the basic premise of the criticism from the civic world—that higher prices can make a food source inaccessible to those with lower incomes—but sought to clarify the elements involved in the criticism. Thus, the retailers explained that their prices on staple items are actually quite affordable, or pointed out that supermarkets’ value offers may be misleading. Retailers also mentioned spending priorities, for example one retailer publicly challenged consumers on this issue, pointing out that people are happy to pay a lot for lattes, but not fairly priced food, thus suggesting that consumers do

<sup>2</sup> Higher prices are, of course, not an ‘alternative’ practice as such, but may reflect ones, such as paying producers a fair price, sustainable production or a smaller scale of production.

**Table 3** Justifying practices

What is justified	Themes of justification	World of justification
Doing things differently		
Higher prices	High quality: the foods sold are great tasting, fresh, not comparable to 'bulk', industrial foods	Market
	Fair deal, sustainability: there is more work involved in producing environmentally and ethically sound foods and the producers should be paid accordingly. Consumers paying more for such foods are not being ripped off	Civic, green
	Food should be valued more. We should not run after lowest price. We should eat less but better. Supermarkets spread cheapness mentality, leading to consumers not valuing food	Domestic
	Affordability: pointing out that overall value is good. Challenging the perception of high prices. Resisting elitist label, emphasizing that their products are accessible to 'normal' people. Criticizing supermarkets for misleading value offer	Market, civic
Not offering everything	Sustainability reasons (no fish/meat/unethical products)	Civic, green
	High quality: Carefully picked product selection rather than bulk	Market
	Local economy: Important to support domestic producers rather than source from abroad	Domestic
Uneven or seasonal supply	Local economy: Important to support domestic producers rather than source from abroad	Domestic
	Enjoyment of seasonal foods: they taste better and there is joy in anticipating seasonal foods	Market, inspiration
Fixed veg box contents	Accepting realities of growing with crop failures or crops being late	Civic, green
	Fair deal: predictable sourcing is fairer to growers and planned boxes enable sourcing the most affordable products	Civic, market
	Reduces waste	Green
Quality is not as expected	Valuing food, reducing waste: using products that don't fit supermarket criteria in appearance rather than wasting them. Strange-looking vegetables still taste great	Green, market
Doing things conventionally		
Importing	Serving our customers well: the reality is that consumers will not be satisfied with only domestically sourced foods year-round.	Market
	Sustainability reasons: transporting preferable to greenhouse growing, benefits to developing country producers	Green, civic, industrial
Selling non-organic foods	Prioritizing local or domestic sourcing over organic	Domestic
	Affordability (in the case of meat)	Market
	Even if the food selected is non-organic, it is sustainability produced and comes from suppliers we know and trust	Domestic
Using packaging	Sometimes necessary to maintain quality and avoid food waste	Market, green

not themselves pass the civic world test. Further, almost all of the retailers suggested strategies to offset higher prices, appealing to a spirit of moderation and simplicity, reflecting the domestic world of justification: more careful food buying, wasting less, basing one's diet around more basic, staple foods, and cooking from scratch. This can be seen as an expression of compromise, where elements from another world are introduced to facilitate an agreement.

Another significant area of difference, which all but two of the retailers justified in some way, is the perceived inconvenience compared to supermarket shopping. This is a criticism stemming from the industrial world. Limitations in product selection and uneven availability of products were the central issues the retailers addressed. In other words, the retailers had to justify the curated product selection that is part of their alternativeness.

Also here, the retailers used the strategy of denunciation again, with sustainability or ethical reasons (green and civic worlds) in a few cases stated as a reason for limitations in product selection. For example, some retailers did not sell meat or fish, or types of meat or fish that they deemed unethical. Favoring, or exclusively sourcing, domestically produced food also presented limitations in selection in a few cases. The notion of hand-picking only the best quality items (market world) was another way of denouncing the industrial world ideal of a uniform, comprehensive selection of foods. A few retailers also questioned the desirability of a constant, year-round supply of foods typical to supermarkets (industrial world) through positive notions of the superior taste of seasonal foods (as opposed to bland, "rootless", out-of-season foods), drawing on the market world of justification, and also

celebrating seasonality as a source of fascination and joyful anticipation, in contrast to the monotonous overabundance of supermarkets (inspiration world). Thus, the retailers framed the unavailability of foods that is linked to a local, seasonal offering, as something positive: a certain scarcity, anticipation rather than instant gratification, and being thrifty and resourceful were presented as something that “makes life interesting” (R1).

The second broader area was justifying instances of doing things similarly to the conventional food system, going against what perhaps is expected of AFNs. This was much less pronounced than the justification of doing things differently than in the conventional food system, but interesting in that in some cases, the retailers put significant effort into justifying these conventionalized practices.

Importing foods was the most prominent example of such a contested practice, with the majority of the retailers justifying this in some form. Here, the form of justification was typically, in CT terms, a compromise. The retailers acknowledged the concern about the environmental impacts but assured that the modes of transport used have a low impact (green world). In parallel to this they invoked the market world in arguing that they are responding to customer demands, as few people will actually be satisfied with only local food when the growing season (in these countries) is so limited, and consumers are accustomed to having for example tropical fruits as a staple food in their diets. One retailer further backed this up with justifications from the industrial world, leaning on sustainability science to expand on reasons why importing foods is not automatically unsustainable. The issue of imported foods also made very visible the complexity of AFN practice and perceived expectations. Some retailers expressed justifications for a more localized provisioning of food, but made a concession by way of selling some imported foods because they felt consumers had come to expect them— and then, in turn, had to justify this practice.

In terms of strategies of justification, the retailers used denunciation in situations of fundamental disagreement, where they sought to question the entire motivation of the criticism. In this case, the retailers particularly challenged the norms of cheapness and overabundance. The retailers used clarification in those situations where the ideal or worth underlying the criticism was accepted, such as regarding a genuine concern about being able to afford healthy and sustainable food. Compromises appeared to reflect particularly complex situations with many considerations involved, such as in whether to sell imported food.

Interestingly, the very practices that are generally expected in AFNs—a screening of the product selection according to sustainability criteria and localness—also seemed to be something requiring justification. Indeed,

some of the retailers stated that consumers do not always walk their sustainability talk, and a few even challenge consumers on this point in their external communications. Another challenge was changing trends and consumer preferences, which the retailers saw as being partly driven by the media. For example, some of the retailers felt that they increasingly had to defend the merits of organic production due to the trend for eating local.

However, while justification shows an awareness of possibly going against consumer expectations, and an attempt to maintain acceptance and legitimacy, there were also limits to how much the retailers were willing to indulge consumers. At times, the retailers’ own stated ideals took precedence over what consumer expectations might be, with a certain ‘take it or leave it’ attitude. Most of the retailers expressed integrity and sticking to principles as important (civic world), some even at the expense of commercial success and popularity with consumers. This sometimes linked to criticisms of other alternative retailers who were considered less principled. The retailers’ thoughts on the topic included the following:

Should we loosen our principles and sell non-organic products, maybe that would be better for business. But I don’t know that we could live with that choice. (R8)

If customers want this to turn more supermarket-like, then I’ll stop doing this and do something else. I won’t do it. If the customers want that, they can go the supermarket. I’m not ready to sell my soul in that way. (R9)

You can’t be that fickle, that responsive [changing product offering after already agreeing with suppliers what they should grow], or you’re going to f\*\*\* somebody over (R7)

Notably, besides appearing as driven by principles, this was also in some cases linked to business considerations and a guarding of the distinctiveness and legitimacy of the business. For example, while most of the retailers offered some imported foods, stating the need to meet customers’ expectations of a sufficiently complete product selection as a reason, one retailer with a domestic foods offering had decided to refrain from selling imported foods as he felt that doing this would ultimately weaken the unique profile of the business:

If we start [offering] pineapples, then who are we? (R4).

Thus, in this case, a market consideration—protecting the unique selling point of the business over the long term—led to greater, rather than less, alterity in terms of product selection.

## Discussion

In this study, we undertook a convention theoretical examination of how alternative food retailers navigate between their own diverse aims, ideals and considerations and perceived consumer expectations, in order to better understand reasons for the diversity and hybridity of AFNs, as well as the challenges in upholding sustainable practices and thus contributing to a more sustainable food system. We approached the task through a qualitative multiple case study of nine alternative food retailers, examining what ideals and considerations they emphasize and what practices and decisions they justify. The retailers positioned themselves as different from conventional supermarkets, but this was articulated in many different ways. This suggests a plurality of shared ideals in the domain of AFNs: sustainability and health but also excellence and hard work, and enjoyment. The justification of specific practices revealed areas of tension, and suggested that alternative practices can meet with resistance from consumers. At the same time, practices linked to conventional food provisioning, such as selling imported foods, also appeared to bring with them some risk of criticism (see also Mount 2012). Thus, the alternative retailers experienced contradictory consumer expectations, for example of providing a broad selection but one that consists of local foods, or offering sustainably produced but inexpensive food. The collective expectation appeared to be for the retailers to be alternative, but not too alternative. Reacting to (or anticipating) consumer expectations sometimes led to conventionalized practices, for example importing foods. Yet, there was also resistance: rather than adjusting their practices to any and all consumer expectations, the retailers also defended some practices, challenging consumers particularly on issues of food price and abundant supply through questioning the whole ideal of cheapness and overabundance and suggesting considerations of sustainability and enjoyable moderation instead.

With its focus on the social interaction between actors in coordinating economic exchange, convention theory helped to understand AFN practices as the outcome of the ongoing negotiation of what is acceptable and hybridity in AFNs as stemming from this negotiation. It helped to identify potential alignments and clashes with consumer expectations, to highlight the natural plurality of ideals in the domain of AFNs, and to view AFN practice as situational and open to change. We will discuss these aspects below.

The convention theoretical perspective sees actors as assessing and reacting to what is likely to be accepted by other actors and what not. The retailers' emphases and justification thus offer clues about consumer attitudes and

reflect the tensions and agreements in the field. Indeed, these findings, while indirect, reflect the retailers' long term, day-to-day engagement with consumers and may provide viewpoints not necessarily forthcoming when asking consumers themselves. The weight placed on civic, green and domestic world justifications suggest that consumers in AFNs have a sustainability orientation. Yet, justification of cost and inconvenience also suggests that some of the ramifications of sustainable practices may be difficult for consumers to accept. This is in line with earlier studies that have argued that consumers have self-interested considerations even as they engage in AFNs (e.g., Hinrichs 2000; McEachern et al. 2010) and that the ideals of low cost and convenience promoted by the conventional food system have a strong foothold (Harvey et al. 2004; Maxey 2006; Mount 2012; McEachern et al. 2010; Dixon 2007). The positioning as an enjoyable alternative to supermarkets also indicates the importance of pleasure to consumers, also noted by Johnston and Szabo (2011) in a study of Whole Foods Market shoppers. Some might argue that these considerations are indicative of the retailers' position at the 'less alternative' end of the AFN continuum, attracting consumers with a weaker sustainability orientation. However, there are findings of similar pressures and challenges facing for example solidarity purchasing groups (Brunori et al. 2011) and community supported agriculture farms (Nost 2014; Hinrichs 2000). Thus, it appears that these challenges may apply more widely to alternative food systems. As this study has given an indirect view of consumer expectations, a convention theoretical study of alternative retail customers' deployment of the worlds of justification as they navigate the purchasing of food through alternative outlets (see Andersen 2011 for a related study on organic food), perhaps studying a retailer and its customers together, would provide further insight.

Taking into account the full range of possible worlds of justification revealed that the retailers engage with a broad set of ideals and the data suggested that the retailers have diverse considerations, both sustainability-oriented and more business-oriented ones. This is in line with the view in convention theory that actors typically engage with plural ideals across different situations. Indeed, in navigating a complex environment with many demands, they *have to do so* (Patriotta et al. 2011). Rather than actors having fixed dispositions toward the alternative or the conventional, action is seen as situational, reflecting the situation, audience and issues at hand. Furthermore, our findings suggested that market-oriented thinking (in our specific example, thinking about how to maintain a distinctive market positioning) could in some cases actually make practices more, not less, alternative. This throws into question the view that commercial considerations

necessarily erode alterity or sustainability. Indeed, considering that it is precisely economic considerations that have led some actors to engage in alternative food networks in the first place (for example, direct selling as a way for producers to boost income) (Hinrichs 2000; Ilbery and Maye 2005b), this relationship does not appear so clear and is an important consideration in advancing our understanding of different food networks. This question is relevant for other related fields as well. For example, convention theoretical examinations of plural notions of worth among actors in ‘green’ or ‘alternative’ economies more generally could offer useful avenues for future research.

With its’ idea of plurality, CT has however been criticized of lacking normative direction. With regard to sustainability, if all worlds of justification are legitimate, then it could be thought that other goals could easily overrun sustainability concerns. However, our findings suggest a complex relationship between practices and the worlds engaged: in principle, one can act sustainably even when engaging with, for example, the market world. CT offers a perspective of ethics as a quality trait, of civic conventions becoming embedded into market situations (Ponte 2016). Of course, purely market considerations would ultimately leave the sustainability agenda to the mercy of what happens to be in demand or profitable (see Nyberg and Wright (2013) for a discussion of how market conventions might dominate over others).

The CT perspective in this paper has framed AFN practice as situational and shaped by the prevailing considerations in the sector rather than stemming from actors’ fixed dispositions. The considerations in a sector are also open to change. CT proposes that negotiations among social actors shape the sector (Rosin and Campbell 2009). Potential changes in consumer attitudes are an important issue here. The retailers in this study challenged consumer attitudes in many ways. This, if successful, has the potential to have ripple effects in the food system. Empirically examining how and to what extent this happens could represent a fruitful future research area. Moreover, not only consumers’ thinking is changed. Conventions act as guides for action and reinforce certain patterns of behavior. Publicly ‘inhabiting’ for example the civic and green worlds may also cause shifts in actors’ own thinking. Thus, the conventions that are in ascendancy in different food networks at any given time will shape the views and actions of all participants and determine the directions taken (Rosin and Campbell 2009). Building on this, promising subjects for future research could include also looking at other parts of the network as well as the wider food system. Examining the dialogue and negotiation of worth ‘upstream’ in the value chain, between retailers and producers would be helpful in understanding AFN dynamics, and a convention

theoretical study of conventional food retailers could provide interesting views on the competing claims and justifications in the food system and to what extent they are different from, or supportive of, the conventions engaged and promoted in AFNs.

On a practical level, the findings show where there might be constraints to the pursuit of sustainability in the AFNs in question. For example, there might be pressures to include less sustainable products in the shop’s selection because consumers want choice and variety. On the other hand, the retailers do push back on some of these pressures, highlighting the potentially strong role of retailers as mediators in more sustainable consumption. The curating of a product selection to meet specific sustainability ideals is a powerful push toward more sustainable choices. Consumers struggle with complex sustainability information and decisions. Gjerris et al. (2016) suggest that these decisions could be made earlier in the food supply chain—the retail node could be this place. Sustainable food consumption might also involve a need to give up certain food items, and the retailers did not shy away from this fact. Also, the findings link to the discussion about the need to reduce consumption rather than merely redirect it toward more sustainable products (Gjerris et al. 2016). The idea of consuming less, which the majority of the retailers in this study promoted, is a radical proposition from a commercial actor—and promising in terms of sustainability.

All in all, the findings suggest that the realization of sustainability in AFNs is the outcome of a dialogue between the different actors involved. What practices might be adopted and what practices not is an outcome of continuous negotiation between AFN participants and also influenced by and influencing the conventional food system. This dialogue can also be seen as a positive thing in itself: many scholars have argued that sustainability should be assessed and addressed in a more inclusive, participatory way (e.g., Hassanein 2003; Robinson 2004; Kemp and Martens 2007; Maxey 2007).

## Conclusions

Alternative food networks are commonly seen as promising in addressing issues of sustainability. However, hybridity, or similarities to the conventional system in the practices and structures of real-life AFNs, has caused concern. It has sometimes been criticized as a sign of a weak or outlying AFN. We have joined the stream of literature that takes a different stance and sees food networks as fundamentally diverse and “already hybrid” (Mount 2012). By taking a convention theoretical perspective we have highlighted the plurality of ideals in the field and the negotiated, situational nature of AFN practice. Thus, AFN actors, such as

alternative food retailers, do not act in isolation, with fixed dispositions toward being alternative or conventional. Rather, in order to be able to survive, they must navigate between their own aims and considerations and the expectations of their stakeholders—importantly, those of consumers in AFNs. However, convention theory holds that AFN actors have the capacity to challenge and shape these expectations. Thus, AFNs operate in a constant dialogue between the different parties and it is the general direction of this dialogue that is likely to shape what AFNs might be or become.

Our findings support the argument for a less binary and more pluralistic view of AFN participants' positions and the view that also 'market-based' or 'commercial' actors may challenge the conventional system and unsustainable food consumption. Even market-oriented considerations may lead to sustainable practices. This reinforces the calls for examining all food networks and their potential for sustainability on their own terms rather than focusing on who counts as alternative (e.g., Holloway et al. 2007; Maxey 2006). Rather than dismissing no-show of sustainable practices as reflective of an imperfect, outlying AFN, we might look into the reasons behind this and how this might change. The convention theoretical perspective offers pathways forward to examining the dynamics of operating with an alternative or sustainability-oriented angle in the food system and the dialogue through which shifts toward sustainability in the food system may happen.

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