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Research Article

Balancing economic and social dual bottom-lines: Qualitative inquiry of healthy food retailing in rural Newfoundland and Labrador

Rebecca LeDrew[a], Peter Wang[b], Holly Etchegary[c], Kris Aubrey-Bassler[d], Delphine Grynszpan[e], Shabnam Ashgari[f], Narges Ghorbani Bavani[g] and Rachel Prowse[h*]

[a] Memorial University
[b] Memorial University and University of Toronto; ORCID: 0000-0002-0682-6861
[c] Memorial University; ORCID: 0000-0001-9673-0726
[d] Memorial University; ORCID: 0000-0001-8680-6838
[e] Memorial University; ORCID: 0009-0002-8931-5676
[f] Memorial University; ORCID: 0000-0002-4970-0978
[g] Memorial University; ORCID: 0000-0001-5414-4083
[h] Memorial University; ORCID: 0000-0002-3015-2385

Abstract

Rural populations in Newfoundland and Labrador (NL) often experience a higher burden of diet-related chronic diseases - an issue compounded by the limited availability of affordable healthy food options in rural stores. Our study focussed on factors impacting healthy food retailing in rural NL, Canada, from the perspective of food storeowners. Using three store case studies, we conducted interviews with storeowners exploring the store (ownership model; goods and services offered; suppliers; location; competition), relationship with customers, and healthy food retailing (options; facilitators; barriers). Three themes describe key factors that impacted healthy food retailing in rural NL communities from the perspective of storeowners: (1) the store is an agent of community; (2) independence increases the stores' capacities to serve the community; (3) storeowners are frustrated with imbalances in conventional food systems and aspire to

*Corresponding author: rprowse@mun.ca
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participate in local food systems. These themes highlight the positive and challenging interactions between retailers, their customers and food systems whereby food storeowners navigate financial and social bottom lines simultaneously to meet their own and community needs. Food system factors appear to constrain food store business operations, particularly around procuring and selling healthy, quality, affordable foods. Future research exploring feasibility and impact of healthy food retailing interventions within rural NL food stores and communities, as well as measures to balance power within food systems to alleviate challenges of cost and availability, are needed for equitable population-based interventions to support healthy eating in rural communities.

Keywords: Chronic disease prevention; diet; food environments; food retail; food systems; rural; small food stores

Résumé

Les populations rurales de Terre-Neuve-et-Labrador (T.-N.-L.) sont souvent plus touchées par les maladies chroniques liées à l'alimentation, un problème aggravé par le manque d'options alimentaires saines et abordables dans les commerces ruraux. Notre étude s'est concentrée sur les facteurs influençant la vente d'aliments sains dans les zones rurales de T.-N.-L., au Canada, du point de vue des commerçants. À travers trois études de cas, nous avons mené des entrevues avec les commerçants afin d'explorer leur magasin (modèle de propriété, biens et services offerts, fournisseurs, emplacement, concurrence), leur relation avec la clientèle et la vente d'aliments sains (options, facteurs facilitants, obstacles). Trois thèmes principaux se dégagent : (1) le magasin est un acteur de la vie communautaire ; (2) l'indépendance renforce la capacité des magasins à servir la communauté ; (3) les commerçants sont frustrés par les déséquilibres des systèmes alimentaires conventionnels et aspirent à participer aux systèmes alimentaires locaux. Ces thèmes mettent en lumière les interactions, à la fois positives et complexes, entre les détaillants, leurs clients et les systèmes alimentaires, interactions dans lesquelles les commerçants doivent concilier impératifs financiers et sociaux pour répondre à leurs propres besoins et à ceux de leur communauté. Certains facteurs liés au système alimentaire semblent limiter les activités des commerces d'alimentation, notamment en ce qui concerne l'approvisionnement et la vente d'aliments sains, de qualité et abordables. Des recherches futures sont nécessaires pour explorer la faisabilité et l'impact d'interventions visant à promouvoir une alimentation saine dans les commerces et les communautés rurales de Terre-Neuve-et-Labrador, ainsi que des mesures pour rééquilibrer les pouvoirs au sein des systèmes alimentaires afin d'atténuer les problèmes de coût et de disponibilité. Ces recherches sont essentielles pour mettre en œuvre des interventions équitables à l'échelle de la population et favoriser une alimentation saine dans les communautés rurales.

Introduction

Newfoundland and Labrador (N.L.) faces significant public health challenges due to its rapidly aging population with poor health behaviours and disproportionately high rates of chronic disease. N.L. has markedly higher prevalences of chronic conditions compared to the national average, with nearly one-third of residents living with at least one chronic disease and about nine percent experiencing at least two conditions (Buote et al., 2019). Notably, N.L. reports the highest proportion of older adults with three or more chronic diseases and incurs the highest per capita healthcare expenditures among Canadian provinces (Health Accord N.L., 2022).

Elevated incidence rates of obesity, diabetes, cancer and cardiovascular disease mortality further emphasize the severity of this burden (Lukewich et al., 2020). It has been shown that the N.L. faces dietary challenges, including low consumption of fruits and vegetables (Quality of Care N.L., 2021), which is related to high rates of chronic diseases such as obesity and diabetes. A study comparing dietary patterns over a decade found that major dietary patterns in N.L. are associated with increased risk factors for chronic disease (Chen et al., 2015).

Rural populations in N.L. often experience a higher burden of diet-related chronic diseases. This issue is compounded by the limited availability of healthy food options in rural stores and higher food prices (Mah & Taylor, 2020). Action on food security is recommended to improve health in N.L. meaningfully (Health Accord N.L., 2022). Addressing food security—physical, social, and economic access to food (Peng & Berry, 2019)—is highly complex in N.L. This is due to the province's remoteness from mainland Canada, where most food is sourced from; its vast geography, which constrains access to healthy foods for populations dispersed in rural locations (Mah & Taylor, 2020); and its topography and climate, which make it challenging to grow foods locally. Additionally, the large rural population in N.L. (Statistics Canada, 2022a) experiences economic challenges, outmigration to urban areas, an aging population, and reduced stability of its communities as a result (Sims & Greenwood, 2021). For example, many communities have a convenience store as their primary food retail option (Mah et al., 2018).

An analysis of N.L. food environments and policies revealed significant room for improvement in food provision, retail, and pricing to improve population diets (Vanderlee et al., 2017). Retail food environments significantly shape dietary behaviours and health outcomes in Canada as they influence access to nutritious, affordable foods while often promoting energy-dense, nutrient-poor options. Improving retail food environments is therefore critical for supporting healthy diets and reducing diet-related chronic diseases across Canadian communities (Minaker et al., 2016). In this regard, research on community-based food retail interventions shows how accessible retail food environments can support health. For example, opening the Good Food Junction grocery store in a former food desert in Saskatoon had a positive impact on household food security and mental health among shoppers (Abeykoon et al., 2024).

Pilot studies of food store interventions have been promising (Cavanaugh et al., 2014; Mah et al., 2017; Minaker et al., 2017); however, the evidence in rural communities is limited (Hartmann-Boyce et al., 2018; Slapø et al., 2021). In a systematic review of grocery store retail interventions, only four of 35 studies were located in rural communities (Hartmann-Boyce et al., 2018).

Rural communities are unique and complex, which can obscure common factors affecting food environments. In an assessment of 78 rural stores in N.L., Mah & Taylor (2020) were unable to detect differences in food environments by store characteristics, which may be due to the complex mix of factors affecting store operations across rural communities in N.L. With a large rural population (Statistics Canada, 2022a), N.L. is an ideal location to study food retailing in rural and remote settings; however, this research is only just emerging (Mah et al., 2018; Mah & Taylor, 2020). More research is needed to understand retail food environments in rural communities (Hartmann-Boyce et al., 2018; Slapø et al., 2021) and to inform relevant food retail solutions that can equitably improve food access, diets, and health in rural communities (Needham et al., 2025).

Objectives

This study aimed to explore food store owners' perceptions of factors impacting healthy food retailing in rural communities in N.L. This study is the introductory part of a community-based food security project, Great Things in Store (GTiS), conducted in partnership with the non-profit organization, Food First NL (FFNL), which has over 25 years of experience leading programs and advocacy in N.L. They envision that together we can create a province where everyone can eat with joy and dignity. They organize, advocate for, and participate in programs and actions related to food insecurity, food sovereignty, food access, and food policy. The GTiS project is a strategic partnership with small food retailers in N.L. aimed at improving physical and economic access to nutritious, safe, and culturally appropriate food. Through community-designed retailer interventions, GTiS tested the effect of rural food store actions on community food security. The findings of this study were used to inform healthy food retailing intervention in food stores in rural N.L. for GTiS, and capacity-building supports from FFNL. to support food stores.

Methodology

The study followed a case study approach to understand factors that impact healthy food retailing in rural N.L. This research received approval from the Health Research Ethics Authority of N.L. (20222741).

Participants and sampling

Private food retailers located in rural communities in N.L. were invited to participate in GTiS through an open call advertised through FFNL's social media, community networks, and email listservs. Thirty-five retailers submitted applications to FFNL via a short online survey describing their store and their vision for participating in GTiS. Eight were deemed eligible to participate in the study as per a priori criteria: sold a variety of whole, unprepared food items, had a conventional storefront, were sole proprietors, and were amenable to intervention. Of these eight, the research team, in collaboration with FFNL, purposively selected three retailers using maximum variation sampling to

participate in this study (Palinkas et al., 2015) (Table 1). Owners of the three stores provided written consent to participate in the study.

Data collection

In November and December 2022, we conducted, recorded, and transcribed interviews with store owners to explore factors affecting healthy food retailing, which were used to inform the GTiS project. Stores A and C each had two co-owners who both participated in the interviews. A trained research assistant conducted semi-structured in-person interviews, asking questions about the store (ownership model, goods and services offered, suppliers, location, competition), relationship with customers, and healthy food retailing (options, facilitators, barriers). (See Supplemental File). The interview guide was adapted from previous research by Martinez et al. (2018), which evaluated retailers' perceptions of barriers and facilitators for healthy food retailing in supermarkets in the United States (Martinez et al., 2018). In consultation with FFNL, questions about retailer-supplier relationships, business practices, and experiences with healthy food retailing were adapted for relevance to small, private food stores in rural N.L. (Stuckless et al., 2022). Interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes.

Data analysis

All qualitative analyses were managed in NVivo 12 (QSR International) and Microsoft Office. Interview transcripts and meeting notes were analyzed inductively using thematic analysis, through two rounds of coding, followed by categorization of codes, and theme creation (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Data from interviews and focus groups were triangulated at the category level to identify similarities and disparities between findings, generating an overall illustration of the system. Thematic analysis was completed by research staff through iterative, independent, and collaborative work, using consensus-based decision-making. We generated thematic maps and reviewed data for internal and external homogeneity by themes. Following best practices for ensuring rigour in qualitative data (Morse et al., 2002), we ensured data quality through prolonged engagement with the community through GTiS to improve interpretation of the data, concurrent data collection and analysis, member checking, and peer debriefing and memoing by the research team and FFNL, documented through regular project updates.

Results

The characteristics of participating stores and their respective communities are described in Table 1. All three participating stores were private enterprises, although two operated under a corporate banner associated with a national grocery chain. All stores were the sole food retailer within their respective communities; full-service grocery retailers were between 16 and 58 kilometres away by highway. The stores have been in operation for varied durations, from six to 137 years.

Stores were located in rural communities outside census metropolitan areas and census agglomerations with less than 1,000 people and a low population density (<400 persons per square kilometre), aligned

with national (Statistics Canada, 2022b; Statistics Canada, 2022c) and provincial (Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, 2019) definitions of rurality. Communities were considered "somewhat" to "highly" accessible, according to a Accessibility-Remoteness Index which assigns a value between zero ("highly accessible") and one ("very remote") to represent the community's travel time to amenities (e.g., health care, supermarket, pharmacy), time children spend on the school bus, and the population size during regular business hours adjusting for commutes and short-term migration (Power & Forsey, 2018). Approximately one-fifth of residents in each community were classified as low-income (Statistics Canada, 2023).

Table 1: Characteristics of Case Study Stores and Store Communities

Characteristics	**Store A**	**Store B[1]**	**Store C**
Community			
Population size[2]	584	2,237	313
Population density[2]	19.7	64.9	58.1
Accessibility[3]	Accessible A-R I: 0.28	Highly Accessible A-R I: 0.15	Somewhat accessible A-R I: 0.35
Distance from St. John's, N.L.[4]	59 km	315 km	139 km
Average age[2]	47.4 years	46.8 years	52.2 years
Average family size[2]	2.0 people	2.2 people	2.1 people
Median annual after-tax income for one-person households[2]	$26,800	$27,600	$24,200
Median annual after-tax income for two or more-person households[2]	$68,500	$74,000	$73,500
Proportion of residents classified as low-income[2,5]	21.6%	17.6%	17.5%
18-64 year olds[2]	17.0%	12.6%	8.0%
65 years old and older[2]	26.0%	31.6%	34.0%
Store			
Ownership	Independent	Independent	Independent
Corporate Banner	Yes	Yes	No
Year of establishment	1886	1980s	2019
Highway distance to nearest full-service grocery store	33 km	16 km	58 km

[1]Community statistics are reported for the Census Subdivision within which the community that houses the store is located, since no further granulated population sizes were reported by Statistics Canada. The community within which the store is located is a proportion of this total population and is estimated to be less than 1000 people.
[2]Statistics Canada (2017)
[3]Accessibility-Remoteness Index (A-R I) which assigns a value between zero and one to represent the community's accessibility (time travel) to nearest primary health care, secondary health care, dental clinic, supermarket, pharmacy, the time travel children are bussed to high school, and the daytime population, with zero being "highly accessible" and one being "very remote" (Power & Forsey, 2018). There are five A-R I groups: Highly Accessible (Index values 0-0.20492, e.g., Corner Brook, N.L.); Accessible (Index values 0.20493-0.30979, e.g., Rocky Harbour, N.L.); Somewhat Accessible (Index values 0.3098-0.3904, e.g., Ferryland, N.L.); Moderately Remote (Index values

0.3905-0.4826, e.g., Trepassey, N.L.); Remote (Index values 0.4827-0.6726, e.g., Port Hope Simpson, N.L.); Very Remote (Index values 0.6727-1, e.g., Nain, N.L.) (Power & Forsey, 2018).
[4]Capital city of the province. Calculated using Google Maps.
[5]According to the Low Income Measure-After Tax (LIM-AT), "a fixed percentage (50%) of median adjusted after tax income of private households" (Statistics Canada, 2023).

Three themes describe key factors that impacted healthy food retailing in rural N.L. communities from the perspective of store owners:

1. The store is an agent of the community.
2. Independence increases the store's capacities to serve the community.
3. Store owners are frustrated with imbalances in conventional food systems and aspire to participate in local food systems.

These themes highlight the positive and challenging interactions between retailers and their customers and food systems, whereby food store owners navigate financial and social bottom lines simultaneously to meet community and their own needs. The themes, described in detail below, explore store's agency in generating close relationships with customers and experiences of economic, social, and political limitations, such as small stores in the food system. Exemplar quotes are included in Table 2.

The store is an agent of the community

Across all three communities, the stores are situated within the fabric of the community and contribute not only to food provision but also to the well-being of the people who live there. Store A has the longest legacy among the three communities, with a history dating back to the late 19th century. It has cultivated a reputation and loyalty that comes from serving five generations of customers. Witnessing outmigration and hearing complaints that "there's nothing to keep our children here for," was the impetus for opening Store C. After seeing new houses built and community growth since the opening of the store, Store owner C2 stated, ".... the community with nothing, you know, it don't take long for it to die...This community, when I first came here, I referred to it as it's a dying town...I don't no more."

The retailers' ability to serve the community contributes to a positive reputation and loyalty from customers. All three retailers actively cultivate an image of a community store with a personal touch and with customer service that transcends the merely transactional.

The ongoing evolution of the stores' services is admirable and seems to go beyond the perceived traditional role of a retail food store. In ways big and small, the retailers demonstrated care for the customers, creating and nurturing meaningful relationships with their communities. As Store owner B1 put it, "I don't want people to feel like they're just coming in to shop. I want them to have that overall community feel...that family experience."

The retailers described several examples of how they make their stores welcoming, but their efforts extended their role beyond a friendly partner in the community. Store owner C1 exclaimed:

> We're dependable. People know if they need something, we're there...we're after coming out

> 12 o'clock in the night and getting gas for people because they had a sick child and, you know, and after giving them the gas, not charging them for it…it all goes a long way.

Store owner A1 articulated this mission explicitly when they stated that they go above and beyond for their customers. "[N]ot for the recognition, certainly…we do it because…of the need and we want to help…it's just part of being a good member of the community."

Charity and community support were considered vital contributions of the retailers to community solidarity and well-being, including donations to food banks, community agencies, local businesses, schools, community events, and fundraisers.

Balancing affordability for retailers and customers

A universal approach used by retailers to demonstrate care for their customers was to seek affordable products. Retailers strove to balance the values of altruism and pragmatism, offering affordable products that were still profitable. Offering fair prices to customers was a source of pride for retailers. Retailers' healthy food retailing goals centered on food affordability, "the chance to eat healthy at a reasonable price" (Store owner A1), and, for "people to leave feeling like they got everything they needed…at a good price" (Store owner B1).

However, beyond this, there was a clear desire to demonstrate care for the community through retail pricing practices. Store owner C2 remarked that, "it's hard… to look at seniors where they're trying to budget or in heating their home or have food to put on the table. It's difficult times and not just seniors, either…for anyone, really, it's expensive."

Store owner B1 expressed a similar sentiment, claiming, "I'm in this to make it better for our customers…I don't want to see people struggling and not eating healthy because they can't afford [it]." Retailers admitted to taking a loss or less profit to keep prices affordable for customers.

At times, Store owner C1 made decisions that benefitted customers more than the store's financial status, describing that they "pumped a lot of my own money into the business, which everyone do… I'm after taking a loss on stuff just to provide the people."

An example of this is milk, for which they travel to a nearby city to purchase from a larger retailer at a price cheaper than that of the distributors. Unfortunately, because they insisted on keeping the resale price low, Store owner C1 cautions, "we makes nothing on it by the time I goes to [nearby city] and picks it up… and we sells it because you gotta take into consideration your time and your gas and everything."

Instead of offering deeply discounted prices on particular items, Store owner B1 will often opt not to stock them. "[T]here are things I won't bring in the store because I know it's too expensive for customers to purchase… I don't want to be known as a store that offers things that people can't afford to buy."

For Store B, profitability cannot be subordinated to customer care, as they outlined their ideal scenario as follows: "if I can offer them… a sale on something here or a lower price and I can still run my business, then, that makes me happy" (Store owner B1).

The relative expense of healthy food compared to less healthy items can thwart the desires of both customers and retailers from purchasing and stocking healthy food. As Store owner C1 articulated, "[t]here is a desire there for healthy food" but if the customers see

"it's so much money for that…then they turns to the cheaper stuff."

Increasing the availability of healthy food was deemed necessary, but not sufficient, to improve diet and health; affordability was key. The search for lower prices and the desire to "shop the specials" motivated customers with vehicles to leave their communities to shop at other retailers, despite the cost of fuel. Awareness of, or perceptions of, cheaper pricing in local retailers were believed to encourage customers to shop close to home. Store owner B1 described the minor act of sourcing tomatoes at an affordable price, one of thousands of items sold in the store, to encourage customers to shop at their store:

> I try to bring in other options that are more affordable. Like, for example, tomatoes, you know, there are four or five different kinds that you can order, so I'll try to bring in the cheaper ones. Not necessarily the ones that people you know, [laughs], might at [national grocery store] find, um, but people may look at it and say, 'okay, well, that's too expensive. I'm not going to buy that tomato, right? We can get a tomato cheaper at [Store B], so we'll go there and buy it. It's just a tomato' (laughs).

Independence increased the retailer's capacities to serve the community

This theme includes the ownership and control that retailers have over their businesses, focusing on how the flexibility of their ownership models allows them to meet community needs. As independent non-franchisees, retailers had a sense of control over their business activities, including decision-making about products, pricing and suppliers, as well as the flexibility to adjust when issues arose, such as missing order items. Store owner B1 described their non-franchise status as an advantage for healthy food retailing, saying, "we have our policies and procedures and rules…we're not sort of stuck under…anyone's umbrella so we can shop for better pricing…we're not tied to any one supplier."

Retailers believed they offered better pricing than comparison grocery stores as a function of their small, independent status. Both banner stores maintained that independence and flexibility were key features of their business operations, despite corporate ties. On the other hand, franchises were deemed too expensive to operate and too limiting, "[A] lot of dictation, too, when you're a franchise and sometimes a franchise don't suit a community's needs" (Store owner C2).

Stores A and B valued their corporate banner program, which they believed increased their ability to secure more affordable products. However, Store owner C2 said their store was required to actively seek out more affordable items from across multiple suppliers, wholesalers, and other retailers. "[W]e're always price shopping, we have to…if you can do a few cents cheaper on a product, well, that means more customers."

Retailers strove to understand their customers, used strategies to meet consumer demand, and worked through challenges of supply and demand in small communities. As small retailers, the store owners had the advantage of intimately knowing their customers. Retailers perceived a shift in consumers' purchasing, motivated by increased knowledge of the connection between food and health and changing demographics—a fact that impacted what products they stocked. As Store owner A1 put it, "the customer tends to dictate for the most part what we put on the shelf", a sentiment that appeared true for the other retailers.

With the freedom to select the types of products and services that could be offered in community stores,

retailers were increasingly offering several non-food items unlikely to be found elsewhere in the community, such as hardware items, motor vehicle parts, pharmaceuticals, propane, tobacco, alcohol, lottery, mail services, and hunting and fishing licenses. Retailers also sourced single items for individuals on demand. Store owner C1 was perhaps the most willing to go the extra length for customers, "if someone calls over looking for something, I runs, picks it up at the store in (nearby community) and brings it back to them".

The retailers' independence is a key feature of their business which allows them to respond to customers' needs nimbly, within their means to do so, as it contributes to their reputational strength and the sense of their stores as community institutions; however, it can be straining on the business itself.

Retailers often used trial and error to refine their understanding of customers and to determine popular products and effective marketing strategies. Store owner A2 stated, "We've dabbled in it all, and we just hung on to what would be saleable...," echoed by Store owner B1: "[w]e would bring in stuff, if it didn't sell, we wouldn't bring it in again." Concerns over low sales and food waste override the retailers' desire to bring in fresh or otherwise perishable products. Sufficient demand had to precede supply in these stores to avoid product and financial loss. Store owner A1 summed up this approach with the example of fresh produce, which "has to be something that the community wants, certainly, and at a price that they're willing to pay for it."

Store C also stated a growing demand for fruits and vegetables, which increased their willingness to sell such products; however, it was unclear if they believed they had sufficient demand to avoid food waste. Store C stated that minimum purchasing requirements resulted in them ordering 24 or 48 units of an item to fulfill a single customer's request, which contributed to food waste and revenue loss.

Store owners are frustrated with imbalances in conventional food systems and aspire to participate in local food systems

Retailers emphasized imbalances in food distribution within the food system, believed to be related to store size more than geographical location. One of the challenges faced by smaller retailers was the tendency of distributors to favour larger retailers. All retailers reported inconsistent access to products; the two retailers located further from St. John's, N.L., the capital city of the province, experienced the issue most strongly. This led to inconsistent product availability and pricing challenges, among other issues. Despite placing an order for particular items, according to Store owner C2:, "[w]e don't know until we get the delivery, so, therefore, we're left short."

Even if Store C puts in its order at the same time as the larger retailers, the owners believed the distributors would give priority access to the latter. Store B also found it challenging to compete with larger retailers because they were unable to secure a regular supply of certain products. Store owner B1 stated that the consequence of this irregular supply is that the "repeat shopping that you get at the larger stores [it] sometimes makes it harder for the smaller stores to compete that way and you don't want to lose customers, repeat customers are everything to a store our size."

Despite better proximity to St. John's, Store owner A1 still reported inconsistencies in product availability, which affected their motivation to bring in new items. "[I]t's no good of bringing in something one month and then not being able to get it the next month...you

don't want to get the customer used to getting it then all of a sudden being unable to get it".

Retailers believed that all stores had their deliveries impacted by weather, which was understood to be beyond their control. Weather-related or not, unreliable deliveries impacted retailers' ability to offer, display and sell healthy food. Store owner B1 stated that:

> If you look at my produce section, right now, I've pre-ordered, like six or seven different bagged salads. I might get two today…that's a struggle for me, like, I don't like seeing empty shelves, but it's beyond my control…we never know before the truck shows up if we're getting it or not. Yeah, so somebody could, could shop for, I don't know, a certain type of salad one day and a week later, I might not be able to get it…On a good delivery day, we, our displays are really solid; it's the days where, like, half our produce comes in. The other half is God knows where, or just can't get it, and it's hard to fill, you know, our produce section when you're not getting the items…

The notion of sourcing locally produced food for retail exists as an aspirational ideal for these retailers. The idealized vision of a store stocked with locally grown food runs up against the economic realities and production scale. Local food was seen as a solution to distribution challenges, including unreliable and inconsistent supply, and increasing food costs, but was in line with the values of community care. The store owners all described their desire to sell local food; however, the expense of products, small-scale production, seasonality, and health and safety regulations impact its feasibility. Store A sells small amounts of local meat and vegetables, but only between August and September. Store owner B1 described the challenges for them:

> One of the barriers for me being out here is not having more access to local grown products, right. So, for example, like, my blueberries came from Peru. We have, like, our blueberries grow here like outside the store, everywhere, but, because there's no local supplier here offering blueberries, I have no choice but to order, right, outside, so my supplier picks blueberries from New Zealand, and Peru, same thing, all our produce comes from those…I know there are N.L. eggs, but I'd have to [add] two dollars on every carton if I purchased the Newfoundland eggs…being in N.L., you'd think the pricing would be in our favour, but it's not.

Store owner C1 believed that local food could be a good selling point for their business and has acquired their own fishing license, which has allowed them to sell some of their catch in-store, albeit in limited quantities. They remarked, "[B]elieve it or not, a lot of people looks for it… a lot of people come to me looking for salt fish, looking for fresh fish, and everything."

Challenges securing local fish, meat (game), and produce were echoed by Store B, which emphasized a lack of government support for local food access:

We're not allowed, as of right now. If, if, if the government has, you know, has said that we can offer wild game at our store, I think we would definitely do that. But as far as I know, we're not… if someone just caught a salmon, we can't sell that here…I would love to be able to start a farm, but with what I've got going on here I can't…the government needs to have a direct relationship with these people and really push…the "let's grow locally" thing.

Discussion

This study aims to describe factors impacting healthy food retailing in rural N.L. food stores from the perspective of store owners. Our research describes highlights as key aspects of the economic, social, and political landscapes in which food stores operate. To this end, we found that regular business practices of food stores in rural N.L. simultaneously navigate financial and social bottom lines. Our findings show that the stores served as important agents in the community, providing not only food but also supporting their community functions through independent ownership models. However, wider factors—unreliable, restricted, and expensive food access—hindered further success of these small, rural food stores.

Previous research suggests that a healthy corner store intervention that incorporated business fundamentals, merchandising and increasing consumer demand with a spirit of experimentation can positively impact food store environments in N.L. (Mah et al., 2017). The retailers we focused on all expressed an openness to change and to embracing new ideas that they believed could benefit their communities. Small retailers contribute to community coherence and connection and are distinguished by their personalized approach to customer service and community involvement. These are valuable, intangible resources that indicate relationships with customers that transcend purely financial aspects and may be leveraged in the intervention process. Of course, altruistic ideals must be blended with the financial viability of the business, but this balancing act appears to be the mainstream operational model of small retailers in rural N.L.

All retailers believed that their independent operating models gave them greater flexibility and control. They claimed that their independence enabled them to better meet the needs of their consumers and that this, along with their reliability and generosity, allowed them to cultivate stronger relationships with their respective communities. Research by Rybaczewska and Sparks (2020) confirms a link between independent convenience stores and community coherence. Locally owned convenience stores strengthen the local economy while also offering non-financially motivated services by acting as community hubs, which foster a sense of connection with their customers. In the Western Isles of Scotland, researchers found that small, independent stores were considered essential to the fabric of the community (Marshall et al., 2018). The more personalized approach to customer service, as well as their commitment to community involvement, were identified as unique benefits offered by small stores (Pinard et al., 2016; Benoita et al., 2020; Clarke et al., 2010).

One way the retailer-consumer relationship manifests itself is through pricing. As the retailers all expressed concern for their customers' well-being, they try to balance pragmatism with altruism. At times, the scale can tip more toward altruism, with the retailers taking a loss on certain products. Adjusting in-store pricing to accommodate consumers is not atypical of small retailers (Pinard et al., 2016). Benoita, Kienzlerc and Kawalkowski (2020) argue that small retailers often rely on their intuition, rather than objective economic facts, to make pricing decisions. This intuition extends to retailers' beliefs about how consumers will perceive and respond to their prices (Benoita et al., 2020).

The food system disadvantages which frustrated small retailers found in our study are confirmed by other research. Convenience stores may need to charge

customers a price premium to offset both their weakened bargaining power compared to large retailers and their lower sales volumes (Benoita et al., 2020). Rural store owners faced challenges in distribution logistics, as they found the distribution to their stores to be inadequate and costly (Pinard et al., 2016). Retailers' interest in local products has also been identified in the UK by Rybaczewska and Sparks (2020), who found that locally owned businesses were keen to cooperate with local people and to promote local products. These retailers demonstrated sensitivity to local issues and expressed a desire to choose more local suppliers and products as a long-term goal. Pinard et al. (2016) also identified an enthusiasm for local food and products among rural retailers. However, their desire to support local was dampened by the reality that these products were cost-prohibitive for many customers. Skallerud and Wien (2019) explored the psychology behind the attraction to local food, connecting it to "helping behaviour," which stems from general empathic social and community concern.

Strengths and limitations

We took a case study approach to understand the system in which food stores operate in rural communities in N.L. This study reveals the multi-layered interconnected factors that may facilitate or challenge healthy food retailing interventions. As a community-engaged study, the findings are highly relevant to the front-line industry and were used to inform retailing interventions to support healthy eating in communities as part of the GTiS project. In particular, the findings will be most relevant to small, private food stores that serve as a major food source in rural or remote areas in N.L. and Canada; the findings may not be applicable to franchise stores or those located in competitive, urban markets. This study included small, independently run stores; food stores operating with different ownership or management models, such as those governed by boards, may have different experiences. Further, the participating retailers self-identified as interested in healthy food retailing, which may limit the transferability of the results to like-minded store owners in similar communities.

Conclusion

This study provides a rich description of factors impacting healthy food retailing in rural food stores in N.L. We revealed the important relationships between consumers and retailers, the value of independence in store ownership, the dominating challenge of food prices, and imperfect local and conventional food systems influencing healthy food retailing in small stores in rural N.L. Food system factors appear to constrain food store business operations, particularly around procuring and selling healthy, quality, affordable foods. Future research exploring the feasibility and impact of healthy food retailing interventions within rural N.L. food stores and communities, as well as measures to balance power within food systems to alleviate challenges of cost and availability, is needed for equitable population-based interventions to support healthy eating in rural communities.

Abbreviations:
FFNL, Food First NL
GTiS, Great Things in Store
N.L., Newfoundland and Labrador

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Appendix

Table 2: Theme Names, Definitions, and Exemplar Quotes

Theme	Definition	Exemplar Quotes
1. The store is an agent of the community.	This theme includes how the store is situated within the fabric of the community and contributes beyond food provision to the people who live there.	• The store is the major hub of the community, you know, we're not, we're not just a store, we're a meeting place, we're a gathering place at times, too. News is spread or gossip is spread, whichever way you want to look at it. And it's always, it's always been that way, certainly... I'd say I guess we've been around that much. now we've become a landmark within the community. And you know, even looking for directions, well, start at [the store] then go from there...we try to maintain a clean, clean store and a bright store, you know, and, and a friendly environment, it's not just in and out, the staff, you know, know the customers. A lot of them get called by name. [Store A] • [W]e runs the store when the power is gone, which is a great convenience for everybody. We got a generator, so people don't lose their stuff. They can come and get their gas and come and get their knick knack stuff and, you know. And we give back, too, like when there's, like, say, a community bonfire or community events. Stuff like that... we helps out as much as we can and everything and, like I said, it plays a big factor in people coming into the community... And, the stuff we does, too, is, believe it or not, as a store, is helping the community come together more, look at different things from a different perspective. And the way I handles stuff with the people within the community, like they'll come in pissed off and they'll go out smiling. [Store C] • I try to donate anything within this community, so if someone approaches me for a donation, I, I, will always give to any community activities. or food banks or whatever. Like, I never, never turn down people that are from within our community and support our store. Any organizations that support us, you know, friends and family who support us from those organizations, we will one hundred percent give back. [Store B]

1a. Builds community by managing affordability for retailers and customers	This subtheme includes how managing food prices and options is an act of care for the community. Price is presented as an inevitable challenge that must be creatively managed to make food affordable for customers.	• [T]hat's my biggest, I guess venture now, is to try and help prevent these price increases somehow. I know I'm just a small piece of the pie, but somebody's got to start something somewhere. If not, this is going to continue; people are not going to be able to afford food. Like, just to heat their homes now, if they have an oil furnace, like, I don't know how seniors are doing it, I really don't. So, if I can offer them, you know, a sale on something here or a lower price, and I can still run my business, then that makes me happy. [Store B] • We can't put our regular markup on that because it's not going to move. But we want our customers, because we care, about the health of our customers, we still want them to have access to the lettuce but we don't want to have them have to go to [nearby community] and pay $8 for a head for the lettuce so we're kinda [take a] loss on an item, but...if it just sits there, it's, that's not good either. Customers are happy, we're moving the product, you know, we're not going under (laughs). [Store B] • I'm trying to offer lower prices that customers are satisfied when they come in with the pricing. I hear a lot of customers saying, that, you know, 'oh, my gosh, I purchased this item down [at a major grocer] and it's two dollars less here.' Like, I'm coming here to get it from now on, kind of thing, right. So, if, if they're price shopping, if they're comparing, I think we're in a right spot, so yeah. We're just trying to be that community, family-run grocery store that people know and love. You know, people want people to come in because they're finding good quality items at good prices... [Store B] • Basically, we do whatever we gotta do to do to keep everything going, you know. I mean, some store owners you go into, like, some small businesses I'm after going in, like, some of the attitudes they has, like it's like, 'pay for it or not, go somewhere else and get it, we don't care. The price is the price,' and just grumpy and, you know, there used to be a store owner here, he died now, he had a store here for years. Oh, by, he was some crooked to people. Oh, boy (laughs)! It was crazy, crazy. Everyone comments, 'You're no [previous store owner.' (laughter). [Store C]

		• We're trying to find a happy medium because you know it's hard, uh, to look at seniors where they're trying to budget as in heating their homes or have food to put on the table. It's difficult times and not just seniors, either, I just use seniors because I see more of them, but for anyone really it's expensive. And then, like healthy, fruit and vegetables, like for example I went to order lettuce yesterday and it was almost ten dollars for me to get lettuce to come in. [Store C]
2. Independence increased stores's capacities to serve the community	This theme includes the ownership and control retailers have over their businesses, focusing on how they can be more flexible in meeting community needs.	• We pick and choose what we put on our shelves… they don't limit us as to what we can get or we can't get, uh, you know, if there's anything in the [distributor] we can get it, and if they don't have it, then we're free to buy from any distributor that has. [Store A] • We started up privately, like, to join a franchise, it's a lot of money. It's a lot of money to pay for a franchise name and something that I don't think that we would be able to do… It's a lot of dictation, too, when you're a franchise. And sometimes a franchise don't suit a community's need… Like, a lot of time with franchises, if there's a flyer on sale or specials, you have to go by that flyer, but these are products that would probably not sell here. [Store C] • We're not a franchise, so we're not governed by, I guess, uh, you know, any other entity type thing, uh, so, I guess in retrospect, we can, we can be a bit more competitive with our pricing. It's not, it's not like [national chain] where the manager of [national chain] is handed a manual and said, "Here, this is your pricing model… we have our own policies and procedures and rules it's just we, we're not sort of stuck under any, anyone's umbrella so we can shop for better pricing. Uh, we're not tied to any one any one supplier, yeah, we're just more flexible than, say, your average grocery store… [Store B]
3. Store owners are frustrated with imbalances in conventional food systems and aspire	This theme includes the broader context in which the retailer operates, including challenges as a small retailer and ideas for a renewed food system in the province.	• It's outta stock. We finds that a lot, outta stock and that's another point we would make, too. Like, with us as a small business, when we orders, it seems, like, the [distributors], all them, they takes their supply for the big grocery store as opposed to us so we're left on the bad end of it. We don't get

to participate in local food systems		it, because it's gone to the bigger store, even though we puts in our order same time, so they'll supply the bigger store, say, you know then, as opposed to a small convenience store. Then we has to run to [nearby community] shop to pick it up and bring it back... We don't know until we get the delivery, so, therefore, we're left short....a lot of times we think it's coming and it don't. Then we got people coming in looking for it and then says, well, I'll have it for you tomorrow (laughs) and then I'm gone off in the truck if I can get it for them and bring it back, you know, which is costly too, because we got to burn gas to do it, and stuff, too, you know. [Store C] • I guess our location, our proximity to major wholesalers helps so, depending on what we're looking at doing, you know, a reliable supply chain is definitely going to be, it's not good of bringing in something one month and then not be able to get it the next month you know you don't want to get the customer used to getting it and then all of a sudden being unable to get it. [Store A] • [I]f we had the room, we'd try to get into a bit more, right, especially, like, like, you know, I always thought about it as the same as like the farmer's market that's down there for fresh strawberries and all that kind of stuff, you know... I would like to have... like the fresh wildlife, fresh seafood, fresh vegetables, just all in that part of the store right... I think, I thinks it would really go over good and stuff. [Store C] • [T]here was a small farm there in [nearby community]... but... they're getting older and they, not offering as much. There are no younger people around here offering that type of a service... one of the barriers for me being out here is not having more access to local grown products, right... I guess some vegetables, I guess you could say we could get locally but it's seasonal. Same thing with like fresh products like fish and stuff like that, it's seasonal... They have a salmon farm down here... So I'm really, really hoping that eventually they're going to offer the fresh salmon to stores like us and we'll be able to purchase directly (laughs). [Store B]

		• People want local, fresh, affordable products. You can quote 'affordable' if you want (laughs). Right? I mean, by the time something comes from Peru... by the time they pick them, package them ship them, there's so many tariffs and taxes, and mark up gone on those by the time they get to us, can you imagine if we could have access to that here on the island and, you know, kind of wipe away all those additional costs. That's what's going to make it more affordable for the people in these communities to be able to get access to those types of products. I would love to be able to start a farm, but with what I've got going on here I can't. But there are people out there I know want to, and the government's got to back them... don't make it too expensive for those people to get started, like that's what deters people from starting these types of businesses is the expense of it, right... the government needs to have a direct relationship with these people and really push...the 'let's grow locally' thing. I can't see any other way. [Store B]