

Article

Sustainable Food Consumption: Social Representations of Definitions, Drivers, and Obstacles

Carlo Genova * and Veronica Allegretti

Department of Cultures, Politics and Society, University of Turin, 10153 Turin, Italy;
veronica.allegretti@unito.it

* Correspondence: carlo.genova@unito.it

Abstract: The topic of food is one of the main terrains of the debate about sustainability, with reference to all the components of food systems. At present, a vast body of literature exists about what can be considered as sustainable food products, as well as about drivers and obstacles connected with the consumption of these products. On the contrary, little research exists about the representations of these elements developed by potential consumers. On the basis of qualitative research in Turin, Italy, the aim of this article is to reflect upon what individuals mean by sustainable food products, what they think about the drivers at the basis of their consumption, and what, in their opinion, the main obstacles for potential consumers are in adopting these products. These are the main findings of this research. Regarding the definition of sustainability of food products, research showed that the scientific literature identifies two main dimensions, environmental and economic; in contrast, for potential consumers, the environmental dimension takes priority. Moreover, in the literature, food sustainability is mainly evaluated considering all the five phases of the food chain (production, processing, distribution, consumption, disposal); while potential consumers focus primarily on production and processing, only partly on distribution, and neglect the other two phases. Considering drivers and obstacles of sustainable food consumption, the scientific literature identifies six drivers: environment and health, the main ones, followed by human rights, taste/quality, culture, relationships; and four main potential obstacles: availability and cost first of all, and then competences and culinary habits/traditions. Potential consumers, instead, regarding drivers give priority to environment, and add fashion and identity construction dynamics; regarding obstacles, focus on cost and on competences, do not identify the products' availability or culinary habits and traditions as relevant factors, and add a reference to the creation of social networks among consumers where information and competences are shared as potential facilitators.

Keywords: sustainable food; definitions; representations; drivers; obstacles

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1. Introduction—Sustainable Food: Definitions and Representations from the Scientific Literature

The literature about the interconnection between food and sustainability is quite new, considering that 95% of scientific articles devoted to this topic have been published during the last 15 years. Nevertheless, it is quite broad, considering that at present, more than 2500 articles and more than 100 books are available (this analysis has been developed through Scopus, considering works in English having the words “food” and “sustainable” or “sustainability” in their titles: at present, 102 books are available, and all of them have been published since 2008; regarding scientific articles, the query yielded as a result 2739 titles, 95.2% of which have been published since 2008). As a consequence, an extensive analysis of this literature in order to reconstruct the different definitions and interpretations of “food sustainability” is beyond the boundaries of the present article. Nevertheless, a content analysis of the titles of these works paints a wide and variegated picture of

topics, but one aspect is particularly interesting: both “production” and “consumption” are among the most frequent words, revealing scholars’ attention to these steps of the food chain (“production” is in third position, after “development” and “systems”; “consumption” is in sixth position, after “security” and “supply”; “production” is one and a half times more common than “consumption”). In parallel, on the basis of a survey on the main books about sustainable food systems, and in particular about sustainable food consumption, it is possible to say that, at present, no shared definition or clear boundaries exist regarding what can be defined as a “sustainable food product”, a “sustainable food practice”, or a “sustainable food system” [1–4]. The difficulties reported in the literature in defining and operationalising the concept of sustainability considered more in general, with the consequent current polyphony of approaches, are therefore confirmed even focussing only on the food field [5–10]: as is highlighted by Blay-Palmer [10], referring to food, the definition of “sustainability” is an issue at stake (after all, the same situation emerges with reference to the concept of “local food” [11–13], so that some scholars and public actors prefer that of “place-based food” [14,15]).

Despite this conceptual blurring, several of the previously cited works assert that, even in the food field, sustainability concerns all the so-called “three pillars” [16]: the environmental, the social, and the economic (although most of the scientific literature in this field pays a lot of attention to the economic and environmental dimensions and little to the social one); in addition, even a nutritional and cultural dimension of sustainability are mentioned (and studies on sustainable food consumption often address sustainability as a gauge of spatial and economic inequality, drawing from a substantial body of literature on disparities in accessing nutritious food [17–20]). The comprehensive discourse about this topic refers thus conjointly to the environmental, social, economic, nutritional, and cultural sustainability of food practices, and more generally of food systems [21–32]. It is therefore against this background that consumption of sustainable food must be considered, taking into consideration the ways in which food is produced, transported, distributed, selected, prepared, and consumed, and its impact from the environmental, social, and economic points of view [33].

This article focusses on potential consumers. The literature about sustainability clearly shows that few people adopt more sustainable behaviour only by identifying this adoption as a value in itself: at stake is a complex system of representations, tastes, habits, and needs that goes beyond the concern explicitly oriented towards the topic of sustainability [34,35]. Similarly, the reasons behind the consumption of more sustainable food are very complex and cannot be reduced to the adoption of environmentalist values; more generally, a “quiet” form of sustainable consumption is widespread, in which actors make positive choices and adopt positive practices with respect to a sustainability perspective, but are not guided by this goal [36,37].

This aspect is essential not only from a scientific standpoint but also from a governance perspective [38–43]. In promoting sustainability in the food sector, various global, national, and local policy strategies can be adopted. Some of these strategies operate on phases of the food chain that range from production to distribution and, therefore, primarily involve organized collective actors, but other strategies operate from selection to consumption and thus have individuals as their main referents. In the latter case the representations individuals have of what can be considered sustainable food, and how sustainability in the food field can be pursued, play a significant role in making the governance of food sustainability more or less effective. One of the most sensitive points in this regard is the interaction of such representations with the communicative strategies adopted at an institutional level to promote sustainable food consumption [44–51]: on one hand, it is fundamental to seek effective lexical, conceptual, and frame alignment with the potential consumer; on the other hand, it is equally important to adapt communicative strategies to the goal (spreading practices, spreading representations, spreading values). In both cases, the starting point is the reconstruction of the interpretative frames possessed by potential consumers.

The question is then: What are the main drivers that research identifies at the basis of sustainable food consumption? The range of single meanings and motivations emergent from the literature is vast and complex, yet it is possible to identify six main general drivers related to (1) environment, connected with the reduction of the ecological footprint (for example, by reducing packaging and food waste [52]) and paying the attention to animal rights (particularly related to the vegetarian/vegan lifestyles [53] and to plant-based meat consumption even among flexitarian and omnivore consumers [54]); (2) health, starting from the control of nutritional capacity and harmful agents contained in products that directly impact one as a consumer [55]; (3) human rights, first of all in reference to all those who are involved in the food chain, but also to those who are indirectly exposed to its critical consequences, supporting fair labour practices as well as opting for foods that are produced using environmentally friendly and ethical methods [56]; (4) taste and quality of sustainable food products, often identified as better than those of “normal” products [57]; (5) culture, as a form of consumption that enhances traditions and cultural heritage; (6) search for collective identities [58–61]; (7) political goals, interpreting consumption of sustainable food products as an action contrasting the neoliberal agrifood system [62–65]. With reference to specific forms of consumption, the multidisciplinary literature on the topic also indicates other factors that contribute to sustainable food consumption, but, on the whole, these seem to be the main ones [66–71]. It is also interesting to observe that these drivers, which promote more sustainable food consumption at the individual level, exhibit significant similarities with the dimensions of food security, as defined by the Food and Agriculture Organization and the World Food Summit (1996): the FAO has emphasized the connection between the achievement of sustainable food systems and the four pillars of food security, that are availability, access, utilization, and stability.

The other question is then: What are the main obstacles to sustainable food consumption? Few systematic literature reviews seem to be available about this topic, so that building a synthetic outline is in this case more difficult. Nevertheless, four main factors can be identified: (1) availability of products near one’s places of daily life; (2) accessibility of products from the point of view of their cost; (3) skills required in evaluating different products and reading labels; (4) culinary habits and traditions [72–81].

2. Materials and Method

The aim of this article is to investigate social representations concerning sustainable food products, as well as drivers and obstacles to their adoption, among potential consumers, and place them in dialogue with what the literature says about these topics. As explicitly underlined by Höijer [82], the concept of “social representation” was introduced by Moscovici, but, both in his works and more generally in the subsequent literature dedicated to the topic, multiple definitions are provided for the concept. The analysis of this debate goes beyond the boundaries of this contribution [83,84], but to clarify the direction which the article takes, operational reference will be made here to the definition provided by Rateau and colleagues, who write that “social representations can be defined as ‘systems of opinions, knowledge and beliefs’ particular to a culture, a social category or a group with regard to objects in the social environment” [85]. In light of the social environment’s role in food consumption practices [86–88], it might be relevant to entangle the social representations from the point of view of potential consumers.

From this perspective, qualitative research with an exploratory approach has been conducted in the city of Turin, Italy. Despite the wide body of literature on food and sustainability, little is still known about how consumers in Italy represent sustainable food. And this specific territorial context is particularly interesting with reference to food and sustainability for several reasons, among which that it is the venue of the “Salone del gusto” and of the “Salone del vino” (two of the main public events concerning food and drinks in Italy); it is identified as “the most vegan” among the big Italian cities; and it has a strong tradition of public action and academic research in the food field (not by chance, it hosts the first “Food Atlas” created in Italy) [89].

The research was developed through 50 qualitative interviews with citizens about their representations and experience of sustainable food consumption; 25 qualitative interviews with managers of organic, fair trade, and loose-food shops; observation of the availability and presentation of sustainable food products in 56 venues of supermarket chains and 28 open-air markets.

The present article focusses on the interviews with citizens: the sample was constructed through a snowball sampling strategy, balancing gender (25 males, 25 females), age (25 interviewees aged 18–34, 25 interviewees aged 35–55), qualification (25 with a university degree, 25 with a high school diploma or lower), and area of residence in the city. These variables were chosen on the basis of suggestions emerging from the scientific literature to maximise the variability of the collected data. Once these reference dimensions were defined, the sampling was developed trying to balance people who usually consume and those who do not consume sustainable food products (more precisely, organic, fair trade, and bulk products); the total number of interviews results from a progressive addition of interviews until the increase in informative content emerging from their reading, which was conducted in parallel with their collection, signalled the achievement of cognitive saturation.

On the basis of both the aims of the research and the suggestions emerging from the scientific literature, a thematic schedule was built, and it was then converted into a schedule of interview. This was made up of 35 questions and focussed on the representations provided by the respondents about six main topics: definitions of sustainable food, features of public communication about sustainable food, awareness of sustainable food, drivers of consumption of sustainable food, obstacles to consuming sustainable food, and personal consumption of sustainable food. Each interview was recorded, transcribed, and then analysed through a qualitative content analysis approach [90–92]: firstly, through a coding grid developed from the original thematic schedule; secondly, by adding new topics which emerged from reading the interviews; thirdly, by considering each thematic category separately and researching the different positions emerging from the interviews; finally, by reading the different categories with reference to the sampling variables. This article will focus on four main topics, concerning the interviewees' representations of what a sustainable food product is, why people consume sustainable food products, what the main obstacles to such consumption are, what could make the consumption of sustainable food products more widespread.

3. Results

3.1. *What Is a Sustainable Food Product?*

The starting point of the analysis is to reconstruct what the interviewees mean by a sustainable food product. The most cited topic is certainly the environmental one: in its simplest and most radical form, sustainability means “zero impact”, first of all with reference to the consumption of resources, carbon dioxide emissions, and the creation of waste. This aspect of the environmental impact is often described as concerning production as much as consumption and distribution, but priority seems to be given to production. In some cases, the discussion of sustainability criteria with regard to the production side in this sense refers to specific types of products, primarily meat—in particular due to the emission of natural gases and the use of water it implies, especially in intensive farming—but also other products, such as avocados – which again involve high water consumption in the production process, as well as high pollution in the distribution process since they are mostly imported.

The issue of packaging is also linked to the environmental issue: to increase the sustainability of products, packaging should be minimal, or even better, absent, or at least made with recycled materials. Often, however, especially in supermarkets, products are “excessively” packaged, perhaps for advertising purposes, producing great waste of paper and plastic: one interviewee thus wonders whether a head of lettuce found in the

supermarket inside a plastic bag with the “Bio” label (that evokes the idea of “organic”) on it should be considered more sustainable than the loose salad without certification found in baskets at the market.

In this sense, some of the interviewees contrast the idea of “sustainable product” with that of “industrial product”, where the latter evokes polluting production processes, intensive agriculture, and long supply chains.

The second aspect, referring to production, is that relating to the conditions of workers: a product that guarantees fair payment and fair treatment of the workforce is considered more sustainable. In particular, some interviewees state that undeclared work, illegal recruitment, and exploitation are incompatible with the concept of sustainability. Along with this, the question of animals’ living conditions during the breeding period and during the process that leads to their killing is sometimes also raised with respect to the consumption of meat and its derivatives.

A third aspect, more blurred, relates to distribution and concerns the places of purchase, in particular contrasting between local markets and supermarkets. A local market is often identified as preferable because it involves a more direct type of sale, because it often offers more products that come from local territories and which, at the time of purchase, are seasonal products, both factors described as central to sustainability. A supermarket is considered by many as having cheaper prices, but also as a less ecological choice, which often offers exotic and out-of-season products.

On the whole, the respondents focus more on production than on other phases of the food cycle; moreover, in their eyes, there are two fundamental dimensions of sustainable food products, namely the environmental and the ethical–social dimensions; finally, it can be observed that gender, age, and educational attainment are weakly explanatory of the importance assigned to the different dimensions, although there seems to emerge a greater focus on environmental aspects among males and, unexpectedly, among adults, whereas the ethical–social aspects seem slightly more prevalent among females and young people (no significant differences emerge considering the level of education, except for a generally more detailed perspective among individuals with a degree).

Sustainability [...] is basically given by zero impact on the environment. [...] For me, everything that has zero impact on the environment is sustainable, therefore in terms of waste creation and resource consumption. Zero impact basically means that I don't make more [waste] than there was before; so, it's not that I don't create [waste], but I'm going to replace something that already existed, and ... which would have already been created in a fundamentally different way. [Interview 4, M37]

It is a product without chemicals, and without excessive consumption of electricity or water, and which then passes directly from the producer to the consumer. [Interview 20, F50]

A sustainable food product is grown, managed or prepared following the Earth's biological rhythms. It is easier for seasonal products to be sustainable, compared to those that are transported all around the world to satisfy cravings in richer countries. [...] Then it also depends on how you produce, but in my opinion the real indicator to follow is that of origin. [Interview 49, F42]

3.2. Why Do People Consume Sustainable Food Products?

Once it has been clarified what, in the eyes of the interviewees, is meant by a sustainable food product, we can consider what, in their opinion, the main reasons for these products being consumed are.

According to their answers, the main reasons that motivate people to purchase sustainable food products are first and foremost the protection of the environment and the defence of one's own health. However, by delving deeper into the question, different nuances emerge.

The issue of the environment is certainly the one that emerges most often: personal consumption practices are in this sense described as a tool through which individuals

have the possibility of personally “doing something for the environment”, first of all by reducing their negative impact on it. A second topic, connected to this aspect but presented with a different type of rhetoric, is that of animal rights: sometimes it refers to the fact of purchasing products that guarantee animal-friendly breeding conditions, and at others to the choice not to consume meat or animal derivatives.

For both of these drivers, several interviewees explicitly speak of an “ethical” perspective that would guide such consumption choices, sometimes traced back to a “sense of guilt” deriving from seeing the damage caused by past irresponsible approaches today.

A further aspect concerns personal health: the most sustainable food products are often also identified as products that are better for health, both directly (relating to the impact of what they contain) and indirectly (relating to the impact of the processes with which they are produced), both for those who consume them and for other people.

The topic of workers’ rights, of attention to the conditions of those involved in the different phases of the supply chain, connected once again with an ethical approach to food choices, also emerged, but more rarely.

Finally, two further motivations are cited, evoking different perspectives. The first concerns taste: the most sustainable food products—such as organic or local food, or those that derive from animals whose living conditions have been better protected—are more pleasant to the palate, and this, according to some interviewees, is an important factor underlying their consumption. Sometimes, this aspect is addressed by using the concept of “quality”—more sustainable products are of better quality—but this reference seems to cut across several issues, mainly taste and health, and remains somewhat undefined in its constitutive characteristics.

The second and last aspect recalls the idea that the consumption of these products is “a fashion” for many: choosing these products means finding a collective identity in which to recognise oneself and express this identity, even publicly.

Transversally, three aspects must be taken into consideration: the first is that some interviewees cite only one reason as a driver of consumption, whereas others cite multiple reasons; the second is that, among those who cite several drivers, a priority is not always identified; the third is that it is sometimes specified that, even when a priority driver exists, this can change over time, and an individual can therefore at the beginning approach these forms of consumption for one reason but subsequently remain involved in them for others.

Considering these results in relation to the gender, age, and education level of the interviewees, it can first be observed that the topic of “sustainability fashion” emerges mainly among young people (in several cases only as an observed factor, and thus projected onto “others”, but sometimes also as a process in which they recognize themselves as involved); moreover, a more robust reference to ethics and health can be noticed among females; finally, individuals with a university degree seem to more often base their opinions on specific information about the topic.

Because you have an ideal, you believe in something, [...] [it means] being able to improve this world in some way... this shitty world! [laughter]. It's an ideal perhaps also in the sense [...] you think perhaps that it's good for yourself, that it's good for the environment, that it's good for everything behind it. [Interview 14, F23]

In healthy lifestyles there is also a healthier diet. So perhaps we adults are becoming more aware of nutrition and health effects. [Interview 28, F55]

When you buy it here, at the supermarket, they are often tasteless. Such as, apart from fruit, tomatoes, ... for me now ... buying tomatoes here at the supermarket [...] no longer excites me because they aren't tasty, [...] I must say that the difference is really noticeable. [Interview 22, M27]

Partly fashion. Feeling part of a herd. If you have no other means of recognising yourself, you recognise yourself in a generic brand. [Interview 3, F54]

Well, you know, we live in a society that is currently all about appearances and behind these fashion trends there is perhaps also a bit of a desire to belong to a radical-chic trend. [Interview 25, F45]

3.3. What Are the Main Obstacles in Consuming Sustainable Food Products?

Having reconstructed a reference framework about the reasons that, according to the interviewees, are at the basis of the choice to consume sustainable food products, it is now interesting to try to identify the factors that, in their eyes, discourage this type of consumption, the main obstacles that potential consumers face. On the basis of what the literature suggests, three main elements were investigated: information, availability, and price.

3.3.1. Information

With regard to media coverage of the topic of food sustainability, many interviewees think that this is more common than it was a few decades ago. However, it also presents multiple limitations and weak points.

First of all, it is too often connected to advertising purposes, especially by large distribution chains and large manufacturing companies, with consequent greenwashing processes that distort the true meaning of sustainability. Furthermore, it is a form of communication that, both for the products it offers and for the language it uses, is essentially aimed at a minority segment of the population, already interested and sensitive, whereas it fails to intercept the larger—less sensitive—sector. Finally, being a form of communication in which the advertising component is very substantial, the lack of concrete, specific, and reliable information emerges clearly, as well as the risk of imprecise or misleading messages. Of course, advertising is anyway described by many interviewees as a relevant instrument for raising awareness on these issues, but also as a potential source of imprecise and even incorrect content.

Overall, therefore, although sustainable food is talked about more than in the past, on the one hand, it is still little talked about and, on the other hand, it is often talked about incorrectly and ineffectively.

However, it is talked about in a very superficial way, and in my opinion it is not so widespread, it is something a bit niche. [...] I would say that it is a fairly common theme, in advertising it is starting to be some more dedicated, more specific, advertising, but it still seems to me not on a large scale. [Interview 28, F55]

If you go and look for more credible news, maybe you will find some organisations ... oh well, perhaps the most famous is that of Slow Food, [...] if you go and look for associations rather than institutions that promote this type of product, yes, it is talked about it. If we talk about the mass media in general, the general public, the way of talking about it probably becomes marketing, so it is all treated in a very superficial way, like many other topics. It is never explored in depth, the themes are never discussed. [...] So, I find it like our era, the era of appearance, of marketing, and it works like this on many topics. But if you want to delve deeper, you can actually find more interesting information online. [Interview 40, M38]

In my opinion we talk about it only and exclusively as a question of advertising. [...] Politics, for example, is not interested in these topics. [...] Instead, supermarkets do it only to gain media notoriety, for an economic reason, to attract people to buy these products. [Interview 21, M48]

Recently we've been talking about it a little more, even though it seems to me quite often to be greenwashing, and not much more. [Interview 18, M37]

With respect to the main places and sources of public communication on food and sustainability, the majority of the interviewees think that this mainly takes place on digital platforms and social media such as Facebook and Instagram. They thus explicitly highlight the importance of such platforms for disseminating information and for facilitating

dialogue on these issues between individuals, but also the risks of this type of communication, devoid of controls on content, and thus often conveying superficial, partial, or even incorrect information.

The presence of the topic in both traditional newspapers and television programmes, especially broad-spectrum ones, is instead weaker, whereas a significant role, albeit feeble than in the past, is played by specialised magazines and television programs oriented towards environmental issues. Furthermore, one of the problems regarding the mass media is the fact that they tend to proceed in cycles and campaigns, so the presence of the topic can be almost non-existent or even excessive, depending on the emergence of events that catalyse (or not) news making in this direction.

For all these problems, several interviewees, reflecting upon potential reliable sources of information about sustainable food products, underline the key role played by word of mouth, between friends, in local markets, in shops.

On the Internet you find a lot of things, you find everything on the Internet, if you want you find them. On TV ... I don't watch it often but I don't think there are all these advertisements. There are very niche specialised newspapers. In magazines ... I don't know, I don't buy many magazines. I don't see much in the newspapers, sometimes compared to the past it seems to me that there is a little more talk about it, perhaps linked to the Mediterranean diet, linked to respect for the territory, there is something more. [Interview 28, F55]

In social media yes, in TV, newspapers and stuff [like that] absolutely no. [Interview 31, F26]

I follow Instagram a lot, I see that there ... they also tend to talk more about sustainable agriculture, sustainable products in general. Not on Facebook, but on Instagram, at least based on the profiles I follow, yes, quite a lot. [Interview 37, F36]

Finally, with reference to how these themes are talked about, to the type of content conveyed, the representation emerging from the interviews is complex and multifaceted and the discussions are not always linear. Some elements seem, however, to emerge.

First of all, in the eyes of several interviewees, this communication effectively addresses only some dimensions of the issue: environmental responsibility is in the foreground, issues of equity and solidarity in food production are present but less visible, and there is little attention paid to workers' rights.

Furthermore, the contents of this communication are often characterised by approximation, lack of technical–scientific contents, and polarisation, partly as a consequence of the more general communication styles adopted by mass media on the one hand and on digital social media on the other: there is little information, comparison, and analysis, at the expense of the search for impactful news that reveals superficiality and incompetence.

The very fact that, particularly in digital social media, influencers and celebrities are increasingly engaged in promoting sustainable food practices, on the one hand, is described as a potentially driving factor for the spread of such practices, but on the other hand, it is also considered as an indicator of the superficiality with which these topics are addressed, often emerging more as fashionable issues of the moment than as questions on which reflective choices should be made.

Finally, the predominant narrative tends more to highlight problems than to indicate possible solutions, so practical information is rarely provided regarding aspects such as the impact of different types of food, or the possibilities available to the consumer to evaluate this impact and be able to act accordingly.

On the one hand, therefore, the mass media are criticised for insufficient coverage of food sustainability, but also for the way in which they talk about it; on the other hand, social media emerge as sources that host more content on the topic, but also as sources that are too fragmented and uncontrolled.

In my opinion we talk about sustainable nutrition simply by highlighting the fact that the product has those characteristics, but there isn't ... —and I'm realising this at the

moment because I'm very uninformed on the subject—that is ... there isn't a real explanation of what the impact of sustainable nutrition can be, and therefore essentially the cause-effect relationship. That is, the products are valorised, but then the consumer does not have a profound knowledge of the importance of the topic. [Interview 12, F23]

Some eco-sustainability, or biodegradable, or organic labels, it seems to me, still have the colour green, and there are some products that are given green packaging or green writing, but then it's not as if they have the biodegradable mark etc., and in my opinion this is a super negative thing, it's basically a scam. [...] It is not explained exactly what they are, but the thing is always thrown out there: "Do you want to do good for the planet?", that is, very generally, we act on this generic sense of people wanting to do good without being too specific. [Interview 24, F26]

Social media in general have the bad taste of being polarising, rather than talking about it in general, we argue about it or in any case discuss it in a very heartfelt manner. We don't see much of technical-scientific communication, that's it. Also because, again, the medium is not very suitable, because it is a fast medium, it needs a certain type of communicative appeal, so going into too much detail is counterproductive. But fans are created, as in all things on social media obviously, and that generates an exchange, between comments, reactions, etc., which is quite visible. [Interview 4, M37]

3.3.2. Availability of Products

The second potential obstacle to the consumption of sustainable food products that was considered in this research concerns the availability of products, the ease with which products can be found on the market.

In the respondents' depiction, reflecting on the availability of sustainable food products is complex, as it involves the definition of such products, the identification of potential retail outlets, and consumer knowledge. Many interviewees implicitly or explicitly identify supermarkets as the current primary source of food for most people, especially in urban areas, and highlight that many supermarket chains offer a good selection of sustainable food products, often even with dedicated sections or shelves. However, some limitations in this offering are underlined.

Firstly, there is a problem of recognising "true" sustainable products, contrasted with those presented as such purely for marketing purposes, lacking the required characteristics. This intersects with the previously mentioned question of labels, which are often not very visible and, more importantly, not very clear. Competence is also a factor: understanding supply chains and being aware of the specific characteristics of products are cited as key elements in choosing sustainable food products.

Furthermore, there is a problem of variety, since the supermarket's offer is more limited compared to specialised stores, and it can vary significantly depending on the chain and the size of the store. In parallel, it might often be more challenging to find these products in generic grocery stores. And in a frenetic society like the current one—in which many people often have the feeling of "not having enough time"—the difficulty in finding the products, or even just the fact of not being able to purchase your entire basket at the same point of sale, can represent an important disincentive to purchasing.

Lastly, reference is made to the territorial variability of this offering, being more or less pronounced depending on whether one lives in or outside the city, in a larger or smaller city, and, in the case of larger cities, depending on the neighbourhood.

Nowadays, in my opinion, you can find them almost everywhere. However, one must be able to understand the differences and not be misled by advertisements or those who want to show that their product ... maybe the green packaging [...] is organic whereas it might not be. [Interview 6, F28]

In supermarkets [...] you always have a wide choice, on any food item, you now always have the organic counterpart. And instead [...] I don't know, finding the greengrocer, finding the farmer, or the butcher [...] I find that much more difficult. Because, in my

opinion, you arrive there either because you have a contact and someone told you, but finding it on my own, I wouldn't know where to look, actually. [Interview 15, F20]

I always go to buy fruit and vegetables at the market, from a local farmer, and I know that generally, I mean, talking to him, he tells me that he doesn't use chemicals, almost none actually, so the products are often aesthetically not beautiful, they don't last longer, etc. But beyond being located in the farmers' market, I know this information because I talk to him, because I'm interested, but maybe they are not so immediately accessible to a person passing through. [Interview 23, M43]

A few years ago, I would have said yes because it was more challenging to find them, but it was also something to which less importance was given. Now I believe that there is much more ease in finding them. [Interview 26, F23]

3.3.3. Price of Products

Finally, the question of whether sustainable food products are more expensive elicits fairly aligned opinions. Most of the interviewees agree that these products generally cost more than conventional ones, emphasising that this price disparity is evident in both local markets and supermarkets. At the same time, it is highlighted that, on average, prices in supermarkets are lower than in stores, and sometimes even lower than in markets, and that therefore some possibilities of finding cheaper options exist.

This higher cost, on the one hand, is considered justified because it ensures not only that the technical procedures for the production and management of food are carried out correctly, but also that the workers involved in all stages of the process are fairly remunerated. But on the other hand, it is described as unjust because it constitutes a barrier to the accessibility of such products, their becoming the exclusive domain of the elite. This is why some interviewees believe that national or local incentives are necessary to support the consumption of sustainable food products, sometimes explicitly stating that a product that is economically inaccessible to large segments of the population cannot even be defined as "sustainable".

Only a few interviewees argue instead that, although there was a significant price difference in the past, today it is much reduced and only emerges in some outlets or for certain types of products.

My perception is that eco-friendly products have a higher cost, so everything that is organic has a high cost compared to other products. Over the years, I think this cost has decreased a bit. [...] In the past, they used to cost a lot, now, actually, when you go to supermarkets, there are also organic products that don't cost that much. [Interview 13, M26]

They cost much more at supermarkets compared to other products, whereas for fruits or meat from small farmers ... if you know the best market, the prices are sometimes much more economical than in supermarkets. [Interview 19, F26]

They must cost more because, obviously, the lower cost is dictated by the fact that, if I use a lot of chemical additives that increase production, I produce a greater quantity and can charge a lower price. Instead, [if] I produce less because I don't use these things, [...] the price goes up. Of course, in my opinion, there should be national, municipal, regional, or European incentives [...] to stabilise prices. [Interview 41, M29]

No, not at all! Go take a walk in the markets, and then you tell me. No, they don't cost more, except for those supermarket lines ... that anyway often smell like a rip-off. True organic doesn't cost more; on the contrary, it saves you money. [Interview 50, M55]

But does this higher cost pose a relevant obstacle to the widespread consumption of this type of product? On the whole, the opinions of the interviewees are aligned on an affirmative answer, but the discourse is complex.

The higher cost of sustainable food products is one of the main obstacles to the widespread adoption of these items. However, this does not only happen because individuals may not have enough money to purchase such products, but also because they do not

perceive the expenditure as justified based on what they receive, and this assessment can respond to various criteria.

Firstly, it is emphasised that, due to the unclear and unreliable nature of existing labels, consumers realise they have little possibility to control the actual characteristics of the purchased product. Faced with this confusion, they may be less willing to pay a high price. This situation can also be influenced by the fact that many people lack the skills to understand the real difference between the different products, even when clearly indicated. Some interviewees thus highlight the difficulty in understanding why a local or loose product, which should imply lower packaging and distribution costs, ultimately has a higher price than the standard supermarket product.

Moreover, the perceived excessive price difference between normal and sustainable products, especially in specialised stores, is believed to be unjustified by the real differences between the two products. This intersects with the idea that, if individuals lack specific knowledge about alternative places to purchase sustainable products, they generally will consider them too expensive.

In my opinion, it's fundamentally an economic issue. Therefore, probably, if people had a better salary, they would be more inclined to buy such products because, it is my impression, the main reason they primarily don't purchase them is the higher cost. [Interview 34, F38]

It costs more, yes, because it clearly costs more to pay attention to the producer's supply chain. [...] [But] I fear that in some cases, for some products, it costs more because it targets a niche of people who are willing to spend more, [...] because it's a status symbol, because it's cool, etc. This [...] further distances the majority. [Interview 30, M52]

Yes, I think that is the main obstacle. Also because sometimes you get the feeling that the price difference is not justified by the fact that the product is organic or more sustainable. In the sense that if it's a sustainable product, because it has a shorter journey, theoretically, it should cost less. [...] And this, for sure, is the main obstacle. [Interview 29, M55]

With fewer chemicals, there is more work involved, more maintenance, [...] but no one ... few inquire about why this is the case. [Interview 18, M37]

If I'm not sure ... I doubt that the product is really organic because I don't really know what this means, and no one explains it to you. I say: "But where does the difference in money I put in go?". It should be motivated by a real guarantee, at least. [Interview 25, F45]

When considering the issues of information, availability, and the price of products in relation to the gender, age, and education level of the interviewees, no sharp differences emerge. However, it is interesting to note that adults are more sensitive to the "risk of greenwashing" and more concerned about the cost and availability of sustainable products, whereas youth—perhaps because they are less exposed to traditional media and less directly involved in daily shopping—seem to feel these two issues less acutely. As for the education level, individuals with a university degree often emphasize the potential negative impact of both products' prices and poor or inadequate information; in contrast, individuals with a diploma or lower qualification—perhaps also due to often having lower economic means—identify the economic issue as a fundamental obstacle.

3.4. What Could Make the Consumption of Sustainable Food Products More Widespread?

The discourses of the interviewees about obstacles confirmed that greater information, increased availability, and reduced prices are factors that could encourage the consumption of sustainable food products. However, other factors also emerged in their narratives, and these are the most relevant ones.

Strengthen education: Educate about sustainability from childhood, aiming to make people understand that the choice of sustainable products is a fundamental step towards more favourable development in terms of environmental and social impact. In this sense, the family and the school are given a central role. This topic is connected with that of

information: multiple channels (television and digital social media primarily, also through the contribution of influencers and famous people) should be used to raise awareness of the production, distribution, and transformation processes of food products, and of the impact that they have on health, the environment, and workers (and equal importance is attributed to improving product labelling rules, inserting clear and honest information, in order to enable consumers to choose more consciously).

But not everything concerns the information–educational dimension.

Economically incentivise the production and consumption of sustainable products: Tax the production and distribution processes with the greatest negative impact, provide economic support to those who produce and those who buy more sustainable products, but also guarantee the quality of these products, so that this is able to balance out their greater cost.

Promote direct links between producers and consumers: Through local markets, this link can help to create trust and awareness about the origin and quality of products. Involvement and practical experience are thus factors often indicated as potential catalysts for change: participating in community events or visiting local companies and markets can push people to be more attentive to this type of products, since direct involvement can often be more effective than theoretical information.

Encourage the creation of consumer communities in which to share experiences and knowledge: Group influence and information sharing can help people make more informed choices.

On the whole, these are the main possible interventions that emerge from the interviews, although the prevailing reference is to education and price reduction.

Education. Starting from schools, it is essential to start from childhood, to educate on the topic in such a way that then, going forward with the generations, there is more awareness. Then the child is a little more malleable, so I think starting from schools is fundamental. [Interview 13, M26]

Maximum action on awareness, ... starting from the State, from the ministries, whatever you want, from anything. Raising awareness also of supermarkets, hypermarkets, large-scale distribution ... For me, the only way is just to raise awareness, that is ... it is the only weapon we have at the moment, [...] increasing communication for me is the only weapon that we have. [Interview 9, M22]

Affordable prices that are competitive with others, that is, that are not a blast, ... and perhaps more places where you can find these things. [Interview 11, F24]

Certainly many products [...] have higher production costs, in terms of manpower, processes or certification, [...] companies should be supported on a fiscal or energy level, in short they should be supported by the institutions. [Interview 39, M36]

I can't understand what's really behind those brands, so who checks, who controls, who guarantees, [...] doesn't seem very clear to me. This, perhaps, if it were serious, [...] would perhaps be the way to attract more people, even some sceptics like me, [...] a communication that guarantees that behind those logos there are serious checks, so you have to tell me what is that logo there, what does it refer to, who are the certifying actors, what are the categories that are certified, what are the guarantees behind it. [Interview 25, F45]

4. Discussion—Sustainable Food: Meeting Points and Distances between Scientific Debate and Consumers

Having in the previous sections reconstructed the main dimensions that define sustainable food, the main reasons behind its consumption, and the main obstacles that potential consumers face, both as revealed by the scientific literature and as reflected in the representations provided by the interviewees considered in this research, it is now possible to develop a comparison between these two sides.

4.1. The Dimensions of Sustainable Food

Regarding the first aspect, namely, the dimensions defining the sustainability of a food product, it has been noted that the literature identifies two main voices, environmental and economic, and an intermediate one, social, to which two others are added, nutritional and cultural.

In the interviews, however, the environmental dimension takes priority, followed by the social dimension, mainly interpreted as the protection of working conditions in the food chain, whereas the economic, nutritional, and cultural ones are almost absent. On the contrary, a further, less defined dimension emerges related to the places of purchase, which involves multiple aspects not always reducible to a unified discourse. Moreover, in the literature, the discussion on the sustainability of food is mostly evaluated considering all five phases of the food chain (production, processing, distribution, consumption, disposal), whereas in the interviews, attention focussed primarily on production and processing, only partly on distribution, whereas the other two phases were substantially neglected.

4.2. The Drivers of Sustainable Food Consumption

Considering the second aspect, related to drivers and obstacles of sustainable food consumption, as mentioned, the literature presents a more complex and fragmented picture, but, on the whole, six main drivers can be identified (which are explored mainly through two approaches, one focussed on social systems and one focussed on individual practices): environment, health, human rights, taste/quality, culture, relationships—and four main potential obstacles are pointed out: availability, cost, competences—these are the most mentioned ones—and culinary habits/traditions.

In the interviews, four drivers are confirmed: the environment, health, human rights, and taste/quality, whereas the others do not seem to emerge. On the contrary, a further driver is indicated that does not seem to have a priority presence in the literature, namely, the consumption of sustainable food products attributable to fashion and identity construction dynamics.

4.3. The Obstacles to Sustainable Food Consumption

Regarding obstacles to sustainable food consumption and potential strategies to overcome them, the interviews confirm competences and cost as core points, whereas the aspects of products' availability and culinary habits and traditions do not emerge as relevant factors. Moreover, the topic of competences, particularly felt, is broken down into different dimensions, related to providing more information, educating about the importance of sustainability, and enabling the consumer to assess product sustainability on the basis of labels. An additional element, somewhat transversal, is added to these aspects, related to the creation of social networks among consumers (but also between producers and consumers) where information and competences are shared, with the idea that this facilitates their dissemination and strengthens sensitivity to these issues.

These results are synthesised in the following table (Table 1).

Table 1. Sustainable food consumption in scientific literature and in the interviews.

	Scientific Literature	Interviews
1. Sustainability dimensions	Environmental (main), economic (main), social, nutritional, cultural	Environmental (main), ethical–social, economic, nutritional, cultural
2. Food chain phases	Production, processing, distribution, consumption, disposal	Production (main), processing (main), distribution
3. Drivers of sustainable consumption	Environment (main), health (main), human rights,	Environment (main), health, human rights, taste/quality,

	taste/quality, culture, relationships	culture, relationships, fashion/identity dynamics (new)
4. Obstacles to sustainable consumption	Availability (main), cost (main), competences, culinary habits/traditions	Availability, cost (main), competences (main), culinary habits, social networks (new)

5. Conclusions

The discussion presented in this article confirms the multidimensionality of the concept of sustainability but also highlights that social representations of food sustainability emerging among potential consumers only partly overlap with those primarily adopted in the scientific debate. This underscores the need for a critical broadening of the discussion about food sustainability, aiming at providing depth and coherence to a concept that often remains too blurred and too abstract, starting with the polysemy of definitions, which represents one of the main theoretical gaps in the field [29]. The lack of a univocal and strong definition of sustainable food is, in fact, the principal driver of our findings, in the sense that, at the individual level, there is not a shared basis of what is understood as sustainable food (consumption). The internalisation of the discourses around sustainable food, then, is more likely to be related to the lack of deep and effective public and scientific discussion on the topic [89].

These results are also relevant to the broader debate on sustainable development [93–95]. Beyond the multiple existing definitions, if—in line with the 1987 Brundtland Commission report—sustainable development can be considered as that which makes the pursuit of the needs of current and future generations compatible, one of the most interesting aspects emerging from this research is the centrality, in this sense, attributed by potential consumers to the environmental issue and the production and processing phases of the food chain. The other phases of the food chain are deemed less relevant; the other dimensions of sustainability related to food refer to time perspectives that are more immediate or of significantly lesser depth.

As always, the methodological choices and the data from the research presented in this article have limitations, which can be improved with future research. As explained in the methodological section, this contribution focussed on analysing representations, attitudes, and behaviours of consumers and potential consumers in Turin through qualitative interviews. Further research could first extend to additional territorial contexts, as one of the factors at play in the analysed processes is the availability of products in the territory of daily life, which varies greatly depending on the area. Moreover, the number of interviews collected, fifty, although considerable in the case of research with a qualitative approach, did not allow for internal comparisons that simultaneously take gender, age, status, and territorial position of the individuals into account; further research, possibly with a quantitative approach, on a larger sample, could allow for such analyses. Finally, the focus of this article was only on consumers; the same research is currently also collecting interviews with managers of sustainable food product stores, as well as gathering data on the availability of different types of products in various locations of the leading supermarket chains in the city. The intersection of these different data will shed further light on the phenomena under discussion here.

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