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*Article*

# Drivers of Local Food Consumption among Young Consumers: Integrating Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivations

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## Abstract

Local food (LF) consumption has achieved increasing attention over the last decades given its potential to enhance social, economic, and environmental sustainability. Despite its benefits, understanding consumer behaviour towards LF remains underexplored. This study investigates intrinsic and extrinsic motivations for LF consumption among young Italian consumers, applying Self-Determination Theory (SDT). Using structural equation modeling (SEM) on a sample of 931 respondents, the study reveals significant roles for perceived benefits, knowledge, satisfaction, and food sustainability concern (FSC) in shaping LF consumption intentions. Moreover, the findings underscore the importance of food sustainability concern, as and extrinsic motivation improving the effect of the intrinsic ones, thus fostering persistent intention to consume local food.

**Keywords:** local food; consumer behaviour; self-determination theory (SDT); intrinsic motivations; extrinsic motivations

## 1. Introduction

Hunger and health diseases are currently on the rise, worsened by recent crises associated to military conflicts and pandemics [1]. Addressing these issues requires humanity to enhance the sustainability of diets and drive the transition towards a more sustainable food system ensuring food security and nutrition for both present and future generations [2].

This condition can be fostered by locally produced foods, whose consumption has been increasingly advocated in recent years as a way to enhance social, economic and environmental sustainability [3–5]. Indeed, local food (LF) choices are usually associated with sustainability-related advantages, such as supporting local economy, reduced energy consumption, environmental friendliness, low processing and scant use of preservative compounds, social capital and inclusivity improvements [6–9]. Recognizing these benefits has led to a rapid growth of LF demand over time [10] as well as to an increased scientific interest from both scholars and academics.

Past research often focused on LF systems, policies and distribution providing large evidence about their environmental, economic and social implications [11].

However, consumer behaviour and preferences related to LF consumption still require further attention, since the motivations behind consumer choices and the factors influencing their purchasing decisions are not fully understood [12]. Notably, a critical examination of the existing literature reveals a lack of comprehensive studies that holistically analyze the factors influencing LF consumption from the consumer's perspective.

Current research predominantly focused on isolated aspects, by identifying a number of both intrinsic motivations, including freshness, nutritional value, taste and healthiness of LF [13–16] and extrinsic motivations, such as environmental and social sustainability [17], without providing an overall framework combining them to compare their predicting values. Nevertheless, a comprehensive approach considering multiple factors can help to understand the nuanced and multi-

faceted nature of consumer motivations while supporting food producers, retailers and policy makers in designing effective strategies promoting LF consumption and the overall transition towards a more sustainable food system [18].

Notably, combining extrinsic and intrinsic motivations into an inclusive framework is particularly valuable as intrinsic motivations should encourage a certain behaviour just due to a sense of obligation, such as satisfying social pressures invoking the use of LF for healthy purposes, while extrinsic factors should provide a more stable behavioural basis to explain long-term LF choices [19,20]. Therefore, their mutual consideration is promising to make LF consumption more persistent and predictable.

Based on this evidence, the present study investigates the drivers of consumer's intention to purchase and consume LF, by focusing on both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations under the umbrella of self-determination theory (SDT) [21], which has had an important impact in modern psychology and marketing research as it offers a robust framework for comparing the predicting value of different motivations inspiring a certain behaviour. The basic assumption of SDT is that individuals who are willing to reach a certain goal that is not set by themselves but results from a peer pressure or a sense of guilt (e.g., consuming LF as it is beneficial for personal health) may be more prone to being discouraged after negative experiences or failures and less persistent in reaching the desired outcome [21]. Instead, people engaged in activities that reflect their own interests and values act mostly in a self-determined way and are more likely to achieve their goals [21]. In the case of LF consumption, this leads to suppose that people could be intrinsically motivated to buy LF as they recognize its qualities and potential benefits for personal health. However, they may be less persistent in their behaviour in case of negative experiences, such as LF is not available or not consistent with own preferences. Meanwhile, their behaviour may be more unchanging if they are extrinsically motivated, recognizing that LF is not only tastier, healthier and more natural than non-local one, but also concurs to affirm their sustainable-oriented values, as LF supports the sustainability of food production and consumption markets.

In this study, extrinsic motivations are represented by individuals' concern in food sustainability, i.e., the extent to which a person is engaged with sustainability issues when consuming food [22], while intrinsic motivations are strictly related to LF's attributes and benefits, personal knowledge and past experiences. Product-related elements have been commonly recognized as intrinsic motivations positively influencing LF choices [23,24]. Past experiences and knowledge can be also included among intrinsic motivations, since they generate signals that can be recalled to guide a certain behaviour (e.g., intention to buy and consume LF regularly) [25]. Communication sources regarding LF are further considered in this study, since prior research commonly recognized that the more exposed consumers are to information dealing with a certain topic, such as pro-environmental actions [26,27], the more pronounced their engagement with the topic is. Hence, information on LF provided by different sources may be considered among the potential antecedents of consumers' interest in LF and (consequently) buying intention.

Two research questions operationalize the purpose of this study:

*RQ1) How do intrinsic and extrinsic motivations affect consumer intention to buy and consume LF?*

*RQ2) Standing from the SDT, can the influence of intrinsic motivations on behavioural intention towards LF be considered conditional on the presence of extrinsic motivations (i.e., food sustainability concern)?*

The study applies a structural equation modelling (SEM) approach investigating the relationships between LF consumption and its potential antecedents, based on a questionnaire survey carried out on 931 young consumers, aged between 18 and 40 years. This population group represents an interesting target market, whose behaviour has been scarcely documented by the literature in the LF domain. Indeed, as LFs are often associated with healthy eating [13,16], past studies increasingly recommended their use by young people to prevent future diseases and to create an overall healthier lifestyle [28]. Moreover, young consumers represent a suitable target market when speaking about sustainability, as they usually express high concern in environmental protection and social responsibility [29,30], so much that, nowadays, "selling products to young consumers might not be

even possible without relying on green strategies, either in the production processes or in marketing them under sustainable principles” [30] (p.140). Finally, young consumers are usually considered of high interest to marketers, given their buying and decision-making power and their prospective economic role in the society [32]. Thus, exploring young consumers’ perception, attitudes and behaviour towards LF is a critical matter, which can support companies and retailers to target them and to properly satisfy their needs and overall desire to buy and consume locally.

The contribution of the study is manifold. Above all, it enables a better comprehension of the motivational system encouraging young people to LF consumption, on which the related literature is quite scarce, by proposing an integrated framework considering the influence of both intrinsic and extrinsic factors on behavioural intention towards LF and their mutual relationships. Moreover, it provides companies in the LF sector with valuable information to better adjust their offer to a relevant target (i.e., young consumers) and achieve an enduring preference supporting the current transition towards a more sustainable food system.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 provides a general overview of the literature on LF consumption and underlying motivations from which the main hypotheses are derived. Section 3 presents the methodology, followed by the analysis of results (Section 4) and their discussion (Section 5). The concluding section highlights limitations and outlines directions for future research.

## 2. Literature Background

Local food (LF) can be categorized by three distinct proximity domains: geographical, relational, and value-based [33]. While geographical proximity emphasizes short supply chains minimizing transportation distances, relational proximity focuses on direct producer-consumer relationships fostering community and trust, and value-based proximity includes shared values like environmental sustainability and local economic support. This definition is particularly helpful as it highlights the role of LF in strengthening community ties and upholding ethical standards, thus being crucial for analysing its impact on both food systems and sustainability, and consumer behaviour [33].

Based on the above proximities, several factors have been identified as potential antecedents of LF consumption. These include environmental concerns, where consumers choose LF to reduce their carbon footprint and support sustainable practices [34,35]; the desire for fresher, higher-quality products, as local foods often reach the consumer more quickly after harvest [35]; and the support for local economies, where purchasing LF helps to sustain local farmers and businesses [36]. Health considerations, such as the perception that LF is less likely to contain harmful pesticides or additives, have been also included among the main drivers of LF choices [15].

While these studies provide valuable insights, they tend to compartmentalize factors rather than considering the interrelationships and cumulative effects on consumers, thus limiting the understanding of consumer behaviour regarding LF choices.

An interesting way to address this gap is represented by the Self-Determination Theory (SDT), originally developed by Ryan and Deci [21], suggesting that individuals are more likely to engage in behaviours that fulfil their intrinsic needs. SDT posits that human motivations are simultaneously driven by the need for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. In the context of LF consumption, this means that consumers may be motivated by the desire for autonomy in making food choices that align with their personal values and beliefs, such as environmental sustainability and supporting local economies [37]. The sense of competence achieved by selecting high-quality, healthy, and fresh LFs can further enhance consumer satisfaction and reinforce these purchasing behaviours [35]. Additionally, the need for relatedness is also significant, as purchasing LF often involves direct interactions with producers, thus fostering a sense of community and trust [9,38].

Integrating SDT into the LF consumption domain can offer a robust explanatory framework that accounts for a range of intrinsic motivations, besides the extrinsic ones. This approach enables the comparison of different motivational factors within a single model, thus addressing the



fragmentation in the existing literature. Moreover, it supports researchers and companies to better identify the most effective ways to promote LF choices, while aligning with broader sustainability goals.

### 2.1. Hypotheses Development

In this study, the behavioural intention to purchase and consume LF serves as the dependent variable, rooted in the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) which posits that intention is a critical antecedent of actual behaviour [39]. Understanding the factors influencing behavioural intention within the LF context is crucial for promoting more sustainable consumption practices among the young consumers.

#### 2.1.1. Intrinsic Motivations

One significant area of research focuses on the attributes and benefits of LF. Research indicates that attributes such as perceived freshness, quality, health benefits, and environmental sustainability are main motivators influencing the preferences and intentions of younger demographics towards LF [35]. For instance, Pelletier et al. [40] underscored that young consumers are increasingly drawn to LF due to its perceived healthfulness and freshness, which align with their preferences for high dietary quality and environmentally responsible food choices. Similarly, Beke et al. [41] observed that high quality, distinctiveness, and excellent taste are primary drivers for purchasing local food, along with the opportunity to acquire unique products that are not found in large retail stores or other outlets. Notably, they emphasized that product attributes hold greater importance compared to price, availability, and purchasing convenience.

These attributes not only enhance the appeal of LF products but also resonate deeply with the values and concerns of younger generations, who prioritize transparency in food production and sustainability [42]. This aligns with broader societal shifts towards more conscientious consumption patterns among young adults, influenced by their environmental consciousness and desire to support local economies [43,44].

In addition to perceived attributes, individual knowledge about LF has been identified as a key-determinant of behavioural intention [15]. In the context of SDT, individual knowledge is considered as a part of intrinsic motivations, as acquiring knowledge often fulfils the innate psychological needs of competence, autonomy, and relatedness, which are central to intrinsic motivation [21]. Consumers who are well-informed about the benefits of LF are more likely to express stronger intentions to purchase and consume these foods [35]. Indeed, knowledge empowers consumers to make informed decisions consistent with their values and concerns, thereby influencing their intention to support local producers and sustainable food systems. Sirieix et al. [45] emphasized the importance of knowledge highlighting how consumers need to know about the advantages of LF production and believe in its relevance before they develop an intention to purchase it.

Recent research highlights that well-informed youth regarding the benefits of LF show heightened intentionality towards embracing sustainable dietary behaviours [46,47]. This phenomenon is also supported by behavioural theories such as Social Cognitive Theory [48], which posits that knowledge acquisition and educational attainment enhance self-regulatory capacities and sustainable behaviour adoption. Beyond mere awareness of personal benefits, knowledge encompasses a broader understanding of the environmental and societal implications of dietary choices [34]. Therefore, informed youth are more inclined to make conscientious dietary decisions aligning with their values of sustainability and supporting for local producers. That is, improved knowledge on LF's benefits and attributes may encourage individuals to consider not only their immediate well-being but also the well-being of future generations and the ecosystems they inhabit.

Satisfaction derived from previous experiences with LF consumption emerged as a further determinant of behavioural intention among young consumers. It represents a further component of intrinsic motivation, supported by the SDT framework, since satisfaction derived from consuming LF often stems from fulfilling intrinsic needs such as a sense of community, personal well-being, and

environmental stewardship. For instance, Zepeda and Deal [15] found that consumers of LF experience significant satisfaction from the perceived quality and health benefits of local products, which are seen as fresher and more trustworthy. This satisfaction aligns with the intrinsic need for competence in making healthy choices, autonomy in making independent choices that reflect personal values, and relatedness in feeling connected to the community and supporting local farmers. Prior research found that positive past experiences, encompassing satisfaction with taste, freshness, and overall quality of LFs, decisively augment the likelihood of continued engagement with them [49,50]. This is probably because food choices naturally involve an emotional attachment (King et al., 2008). For instance, in the context of organic food among Generation Z, Bhutto et al. [51] demonstrated that customer satisfaction with previous experiences strongly influences their intention to repurchase, emphasizing the importance of ensuring high-quality LF to foster repeat business. These findings suggest that satisfaction from past consumption experiences acts as a reinforcing mechanism, strengthening consumers' commitment to LF and encouraging them to continue supporting local producers.

Drawing on these evidence, this study proposes the following hypotheses:

*H1: Perceived attributes and benefits of LF positively influence young consumers' behavioural intention.*

*H2: Individual knowledge about LF positively influences young consumers' behavioural intention.*

*H3: Satisfaction from past consumption of LF positively influences young consumers' behavioural intention.*

### 2.1.2. Extrinsic Motivations

As for the extrinsic motivations driving the consumers' intention to buy and consume locally, high attention has been devoted to the individual concern to sustainability encompassing a broad spectrum of issues, ranging from environmental impacts (e.g., carbon footprint, biodiversity conservation) to social and economic dimensions (e.g., fair trade, local economic development) [52]. The consumers' awareness and consideration of sustainability aspects in their food choices (i.e., food sustainability concern) can create a powerful motivation for consuming LF. Prior studies of Sunding [53] and Thilmany et al. [54] claimed that premium prices were more likely to be paid by consumers that were motivated to buy alternatively produced foods (e.g., organic food, local food) for altruistic reasons. Specifically, Hughner et al. [55] found that consumers are willing to pay up to 30% more for organic products because they believe they help to preserve biodiversity and soil health. This willingness to pay a premium is driven by the desire to support farming practices that are less detrimental to the environment. Similarly, food sustainability concern has been linked to a greater likelihood of purchasing LFs, as consumers seek to support agricultural practices that are environmentally friendly and socially responsible [56]. For instance, consumers who are concerned about food sustainability may prefer local products because they support local farmers [57], reduce food miles and overall carbon footprint [54], and often involve less packaging [58].

Hence, our fourth hypothesis emerge as follows in relation to LF consumption by the young consumers:

*H4. Food sustainability concern positively influences young consumers' behavioural intention towards LF.*

### 2.1.3. External Factors: Communication Sources

Communication sources play a crucial role in shaping consumer behaviours according to various behavioural theories, such as the Theory of Planned Behavior, emphasizing the influence of external factors, including communication channels, in determining attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control, which collectively determine behavioural intentions [39].

Communication channels like social media, traditional media, and interpersonal interactions exert substantial influence over how consumers perceive and intend to engage with LF purchases. A study by Jung et al. [8] found that promotional events, posters, emails, samples of LFs, and especially social media can be used as effective ways to increase awareness of LF among college students.

Similarly, in the case of interpersonal communication, Bianchi and Mortimer [18], highlighted how recommendations from friends and family significantly enhance consumers' perceived value and trust in LF products.

Understanding the impact of communication sources can help marketers, policymakers, and researchers effectively promote behaviours, such as LF consumption, by strategically leveraging communication strategies able to improve young consumers' engagement with locally produced food, as a way for developing a more sustainable food system in the long-term. Hence, information cues have been considered in this study to investigate their predictive power when compared to other intrinsic and extrinsic motivations. The next hypothesis is thus formulated:

*H5. Communication sources positively influence young consumers' behavioural intention towards LF.*

#### 2.1.4. The Mediating Role of Extrinsic Motivations

As far, the research based on the SDT often suggested that extrinsic motivations are more important than intrinsic ones in orienting long-term and stable self-determined choices. Indeed, while intrinsic motivations are undoubtedly important for immediate engagement and satisfaction, the internalization of extrinsic motivations can play a pivotal role in ensuring sustained behaviour change [21]. This process is particularly evident in the context of LF choices. Zepeda and Leviten-Reid [57] found that consumers who began buying LF to support local farmers continued doing so as they internalized the value of their contributions to the community. A similar pattern has been observed with environmental motivations. A study by Brown and Miller [36] demonstrated that consumers who were initially driven by environmental concerns to buy LF often continued this behaviour as they recognized the broader ecological benefits. These consumers initially supported local agriculture to reduce greenhouse gas emissions associated with long-distance food transportation. As they learned more about the environmental impact and the importance of sustainable practices, these extrinsic motivations became internalized, leading to a lasting preference for such foods. Another example is the participation in Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) programs. Initially, many consumers can join CSA programs to support local agriculture and receive fresh products. Over time, as they experience the benefits of direct farmer support and community building, these extrinsic motivations become internalized, resulting in a stable long-term commitment in CSA programs [59].

More recently, Annunziata et al. [22] (p. 92), by combining organic and LF consumption with consumers' adherence to the Mediterranean diet, considered them "to be part of an overall orientation to sustainability, rather than being just seen as a healthier and more sustainable diet".

These findings illustrate how extrinsic motivations can evolve into intrinsic values, producing sustained consumer behaviour. On these bases, one can suppose that FSC mediates the relationship between BI and other intrinsic motivations, since BI could proportionally increase when consumers are concerned with food sustainability problems, regardless of their personal knowledge, satisfaction and perception of LF attributes and benefits, as proposed in the following hypothesis:

*H6. FSC mediates the positive relationships between intrinsic motivations (i.e., LF attributes and benefits, knowledge on LF and satisfaction) and behavioural intention.*

Figure 1 depicts the investigated framework with relative hypotheses.

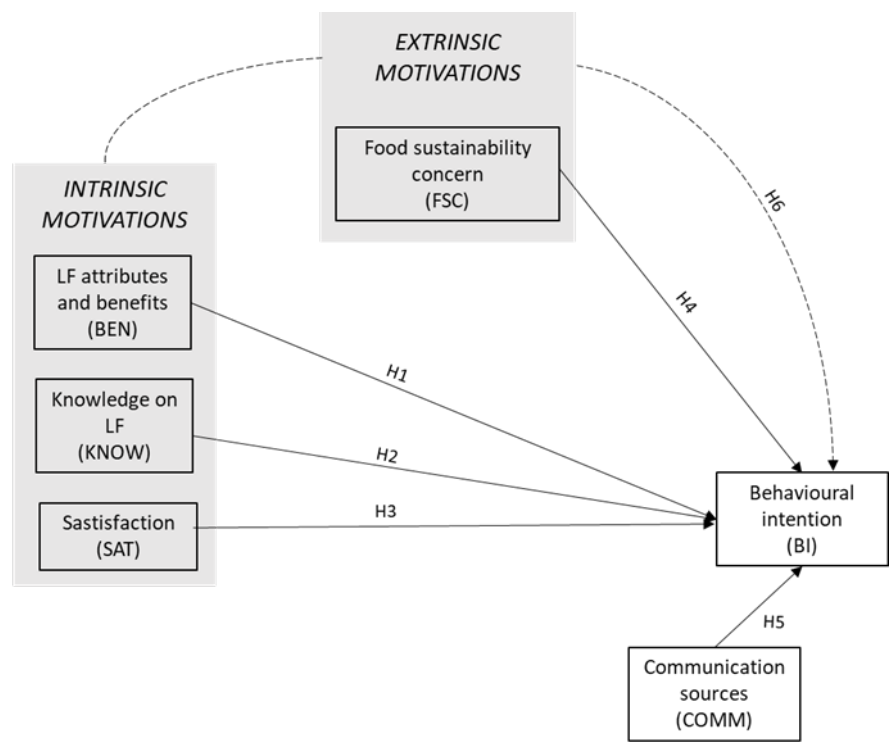


Figure 1. The analysed model.

3. Materials and Methods

Data for this study have been collected, from March to September 2023, by means of an online self-administered questionnaire on a sample population aged 18-35 years. Italy has been selected as research setting for a twofold reason. First, LFs from Italy represent a salient expression of authenticity and local culture, and have acquired an increasing appeal and popularity during the last decade [24,50] resulting in the highest number of LFs labelled with geographical indications in Europe [50]. Second, prior research confirmed that in Italy, as in many developed countries [12], people are highly involved with sustainable food consumption and related food choices, including buying and consuming locally [22].

The questionnaire was developed and pre-tested with a small number of respondents (15) to ensure its clarity and comprehensibility. After being slightly modified, the final instrument consisted of three sections investigating (i) the overall respondents’ food consumption and purchasing habits, (ii) their perception, knowledge and attitudes towards LF, and (iii) their level of food sustainability concern. An additional section investigated the socio-demographic characteristics of the sample.

The questionnaire included a preliminary screening question ascertaining the respondents’ consumption of LF (i.e., *When given the chance, how frequently would you consume local foods?*), based on a five-point Likert scale. We considered only people consuming LF ‘occasionally/sometimes’, ‘almost every time’ or ‘every time’, by excluding ‘almost never’ and ‘never’ responses. This ensured that respondents were familiar with LFs properties and that their preference towards them was consistent. Accordingly, the original number of 1.080 collected questionnaire was reduced to 931 valid questionnaires for the analysis. Table 1 provides a general overview of the sample profile.

Table 1. Sample profile (No. 931).

	No.	%
Gender		
Female	528	57.71
Male	403	43.29
Origin		



Northern Italy	499	53.60
Central-Southern Italy	432	46.40
<i>Yearly income</i>		
under 14.999€	300	32.22
15.000–29.999€	410	44.04
30.000–59.999€	182	19.55
60.000–99.999€	31	3.33
over 100.000€	8	.86
<i>Education</i>		
Secondary school	12	1.29
High school	236	25.35
Bachelor	262	28.14
Master/Ph.D.	421	45.22
<i>Familiar status</i>		
Live alone	99	10.63
Live with parents/siblings	339	36.41
Live with husband/wife/children	423	45.44
Live with friends/others	70	7.52
<i>Occupation</i>		
Self employed	120	12.89
Permanent full-time worker	245	26.32
Temporary full-time worker	128	13.75
Part-time worker	88	9.45
Student	272	29.21
Unemployed	78	8.38
<i>Diet</i>		
Vegetarian	119	17.78
Vegan	50	5.37
Omnivore	727	78.09
Other (flexitarian, ketogenic, reducetarian, ....)	35	3.76

3.1. Measures

The questionnaire items were derived from existing literature to ensure the highest content validity of the scales. Specifically, behavioural intention (BI) is the dependent variable, perceived attributes and benefits of LF (BEN), knowledge (KNOW), satisfaction (SAT), and food sustainability concern (FSC) are the independent ones. FSC is also investigated as the mediator, to specifically address RQ2 (i.e., *Standing from the SDT, can the influence of intrinsic motivations on behavioural intention towards LF be considered conditional on the presence of extrinsic motivations (i.e., food sustainability concern?)*).

Items for measuring perceived attributes and benefits of local foods were adapted from Schönhart et al. [60] analysing the most frequent expected effects of typical-local food systems on potential stakeholders. Additional items were included according to Roininen et al. [61], exploring the consumers’ perception of LF, and the recent Barilla Food Center’s [62] Report on global trends, which particularly underlines the opportunity to protect the environment, local culture and traditions among the main factors influencing the attention towards LF consumption.

Items concerning knowledge, satisfaction and behavioural intention towards LF have been drawn from Lee et al.’ [63] study, based on prior research of Shepherd and Towler [64] for knowledge, Oliver [65] for satisfaction, and Zeithaml et al. [66] for behavioural intention respectively.

Communication sources have been extracted from the IFIC Survey [67] on Food and health, investigating the main trusted sources guiding food choices under a healthy perspective.

Finally, items for food sustainability concerns were taken, with few adaptations, from Annunziata et al. [22], analysing the organic and LF consumption of Italian families. All items were measured on a 7-point Likert scale of agreement (1=strongly disagree; 7=strongly agree).

Appendix A provides full description of the variables with related references.

### 3.2. Data Processing

The data analysis followed a multi-step procedure, combining descriptive statistics with multivariate techniques. The former was useful to provide a preliminary overview of the respondents' profile and food habits, based on frequencies, mean values and standard deviations. Multivariate techniques were applied to investigate the hypothesized relationships among variables. Specifically, an exploratory factor analysis (EFA), based on the maximum likelihood estimation, was performed to identify the key-factors associated to those antecedents of behavioural intention that are based on a relevant number of items, i.e., LF benefits (BEN), food sustainability concern (FSC), and communication sources (COMM). The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity supported the appropriateness of such analysis [68]. Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was conducted to assess the reliability and validity of the model and to investigate the multiple relationships among variables. Before running the multivariate analysis, the inter-items correlation of each construct was observed [69]. It was not higher than 0.50, thus avoiding collinearity problems. Finally structural equation modelling (SEM) was applied to assess the hypothesized relationships among variables.

Data analysis was conducted through R 3.5.0 statistical software package.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Descriptive Statistics and Factor Analysis

Food habits of young respondents are characterized as follows. More than 89% of the sample buy food products from one to three times a week and the average expenditure is between 30 and 100€, revealing their intention to minimize time and shopping efforts by reducing the weekly shopping in one or few expeditions. Respondents typically shop in their city of residence (mean: 3.25), preferring supermarkets (mean: 3.06) and local convenience stores (mean: 2.12), mainly due to their balance between convenience and product variety. Store selection is primarily driven by the search for convenience, encompassing economic factors (such as good prices and promotions), location (including store proximity, parking facilities, and hours of operation), product assortment (size and variety), and the high quality of fresh foods.

Respondents reported having a good knowledge of LFs (mean: 4.33) and expressed high satisfaction with their past consumption experiences (mean: 5.17). Additionally, they indicated a strong intention to purchase and consume these foods in the future (mean: 5.62).

Then, they were asked to identify which LF they had purchased in the past two weeks, selecting from up to nine different food categories. The highest mean values were observed for fruit and vegetables (mean: 4.58), olive oil (mean: 4.55), and eggs (mean: 4.39), aligning with the food categories most frequently bought directly from producers [70].

Overall, respondents declared to be highly willing to pay for buying a food that is both locally produced and environmentally sustainable (mean: 5.51).

The exploratory factor analysis produced significant results for the investigated constructs (i.e., BEN, FSC and COMM), revealing that economic and environmental protection are the most representative benefits associated to LF, followed by safety and health-related ones. With respect to FSC, mean values higher than 0.5 reveal that respondents are usually highly concerned with sustainability issues related to food choices. However, results from the EFA revealed that environmental dimensions are prominent, followed by social and economic issues related to food sustainability and package-related ones. Finally, specialized and mass communication conveyed through daily press, TV and social networks, emerged as the most prominent communications

sources informing on LF, followed by scientific studies and product or process certifications. Informal communication appears to be the less relevant informing source (Table 2).

**Table 2.** Results from the EFA (cut-off value: >0.4)<sup>1</sup>.

LOCAL FOOD BENEFITS (BEN)				
	Economic and environmental benefits	Safety and health-related benefits	Culture and heritage-related benefits	Personal well-being benefits
LF1				.911
LF2				.601
LF3	.752			
LF4	.866			
LF5		.892		
LF6		.978		
LF7			.649	
LF8	.729			
LF9	.746			
LF10			.648	
LF11			.920	
Proportional variance	.220	.176	.163	.113
Cumulative Variance	.220	.396	.558	.671
PRELIMINARY TESTS: (1) KMO: .8663701; (2) Bartlett Test of Sphericity: 6722.174 (df = 66; p < 2.22e-16); (3) Test of the hypothesis that four factors are sufficient: Chi-square = 142.37 (df = 17; p < 7.54e-22).				
FOOD SUSTAINABILITY CONCERN (FSC)				
		Environmental-related concerns	Social and economic-related concerns	Product-related concerns
FSC1				.624
FSC2				1.046
FSC3		.562		
FSC4		.783		
FSC5		.535		
FSC6		.900		
FSC7		.989		
FSC8			.601	
FSC9			1.041	
FSC10			.520	
Proportional variance		.324	.180	.162
Cumulative Variance		.324	.504	.666
PRELIMINARY TESTS: (1) KMO: .9228606; (2) Bartlett Test of Sphericity: Chi-square = 6729.746 (df = 45; p < 2.22e-16); (3) Test of the hypothesis that three factors are sufficient: Chi-square = 156.39 (df = 18; p < 4.23e-24).				
COMMUNICATION SOURCES (COMM)				
	Specialized and mass communication	Scientific studies	Product-process certification	Informal sources
C1				1.015
C2				.832
C3			1.048	
C4			.789	
C5		.894		
C6		1.038		
C7	.630			
C8	.967			

C9	.894			
C10	.616			
C11	.438			
Proportional variance	.247	.193	.160	.157
Cumulative Variance	.247	.440	.600	.757

PRELIMINARY TESTS: (1) KMO: .8137238; (2) Bartlett Test of Sphericity: Chi square = 7882.73 (df = 66; p < 2.22e-16); (3) Test of the hypothesis that four factors are sufficient: Chi-square = 189.08 (df = 17; p < 4.43e-31).

<sup>1</sup> The items ‘Local food increases community power and personal relationships’ and ‘Suggestions from healthcare and nutritionists’ have been removed from the original lists of LF benefits and communication cues respectively, as their loadings were under the cutoff value.

4.2. Factors Affecting Behavioural Intention Towards LF: The SEM Analysis

Before analyzing the multiple relationships among variables, the SEM method was used to assess the reliability, unidimensionality, and validity of the investigated model, based on the factor solutions that emerged from the EFA. Each construct’s reliability was evaluated by calculating Alpha values and Composite Reliability (CR). The ranges of both indices indicate an appropriate level of internal consistency [71,72]. All factor loadings exceeded the lower limit of 0.4, and inter-construct correlations generally fell between 0.20 and 0.70, suggesting that items measure the same underlying characteristic while maintaining unique variance [71]. Both convergent and discriminant validity were confirmed, as the average variance extracted (AVE) for each construct exceeded the threshold value of 0.50 and the square of its inter-construct correlation [72], thereby supporting the overall validity of the model (Tables 3-4).

Table 3. The measurement model.

Construct/ Items	Loading	St.Err.	z-value	p-value	α	CR	AVE	R2
BEHAVIOURAL INTENTION (BI)								
BI1	.618	.021	29.549	.000	.952	.952	.869	.873
BI2	.619	.023	27.429	.000				
BI3	.609	.021	29.228	.000				
LOCAL FOOD BENEFITS (BEN)								
Economic and environmental benefits (BEN1)								
LF3	1.178	.048	24.681	.000	.863	.863	.613	.612
LF4	1.264	.045	28.145	.000				
LF8	1.362	.051	26.922	.000				
LF9	1.365	.047	29.110	.000				
Safety and health-related benefits (BEN2)								
LF5	1.678	.046	36.106	.000	.937	.937	.881	.882
LF6	1.721	.046	27.232	.000				
Culture and heritage-related benefits (BEN3)								
LF7	1.205	.063	18.984	.000	.802	.803	.580	.585
LF10	1.577	.054	29.130	.000				
LF11	1.621	.059	27.268	.000				
Personal well-being benefits (BEN4)								
LF1	1.323	.049	26.822	.000	.811	.813	.685	.684
LF2	1.457	.050	29.294	.000				
KNOWLEDGE ON LOCAL FOOD (KNOW)								
K1	1.372	.043	31.745	.000	.858	.859	.671	.678
K2	1.278	.047	27.179	.000				
K3	1.268	.045	28.111	.000				
SATISFACTION (SAT)								
S1	1.239	.036	34.249	.000	.926	.927	.809	.809
S2	1.287	.039	33.378	.000				

S3	1.353	.036	37.435	.000				
FOOD SUSTAINABILITY CONCERN (FSC)								
Environmental-related concern (FSC1)								
FSC3	1.106	.041	27.003	.000	.908	.908	.665	.666
FSC4	1.048	.038	27.596	.000				
FSC5	1.247	.040	31.498	.000				
FSC6	1.217	.042	28.787	.000				
FSC7	1.234	.036	34.240	.000				
Social and economic-related concerns (FSC2)								
FSC8	1.343	.043	31.102	.000	.876	.878	.706	.706
FSC9	1.398	.044	31.996	.000				
FSC10	1.290	.045	28.902	.000				
Product-related concerns (FSC3)								
FSC1	1.376	.048	28.844	.000	.808	.811	.682	.681
FSC2	1.232	.047	26.261	.000				
COMMUNICATION SOURCES (COMM)								
Specialized and mass communication (COMM1)								
C7	1.499	.056	26.746	.000	.852	.856	.546	.542
C8	1.535	.047	32.662	.000				
C9	1.302	.048	26.971	.000				
C10	1.237	.056	19.453	.000				
C11	2.247	.061	20.289	.000				
Scientific studies (COMM2)								
C5	1.543	.041	37.779	.000	.939	.939	.886	.886
C6	1.505	.042	35.415	.000				
Product-process certification (COMM3)								
C3	1.452	.041	35.662	.000	.919	.919	.850	.851
C4	1.444	.042	34.593	.000				
Informal sources (COMM4)								
C1	1.580	.054	29.465	.000	.929	.929	.868	.875
C2	1.652	.049	33.849	.000				

MODEL FIT:

Comparative Fit Index (CFI) = .937 (Bentler, 1990: >0.90); Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI) = .925 (Tucker and Lewis, 1973: >0.90 ); Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) = .055 p-value= .0000 (Hu and Bentler, 1999: <0.60); Standardized Root Mean Square Error Residual (SRMSR) = .041 (Hu and Bentler, 1999: <0.10).

Table 4. Construct correlation and discriminant validity.

	BI	BEN1	BEN2	BEN3	BEN4	KNOW	SAT	FSC1	FSC2	FSC3	COMM1	COMM2	COMM3
BI	<b>.932</b>												
BEN1	.602	<b>.783</b>											
BEN2	.414	.566	<b>.939</b>										
BEN3	.473	.619	.636	<b>.762</b>									
BEN4	.484	.618	.751	.599	<b>.828</b>								
KNOW	.669	.483	.392	.500	.431	<b>.819</b>							
SAT	.857	.572	.461	.544	.547	.715	<b>.899</b>						
FSC1	.469	.561	.336	.345	.304	.395	.412	<b>.815</b>					
FSC2	.360	.488	.204	.255	.224	.337	.333	.873	<b>.840</b>				
FSC3	.413	.491	.174	.188	.215	.281	.344	.760	.672	<b>.826</b>			
COMM1	.246	.337	.247	.328	.211	.0216	.283	.317	.313	.239	<b>.739</b>		
COMM2	.389	.557	.275	.265	.296	.282	.367	.504	.495	.434	.511	<b>.941</b>	
COMM3	.487	.626	.395	.402	.415	.380	.490	.559	.461	.473	.433	.681	<b>.922</b>
COMM4	.295	.326	.226	.212	.287	.110	.264	.237	.171	.257	.353	.395	.422



Besides assessing the model validity, a multiple regression analysis allowed to verify whether and how the intrinsic and extrinsic motivations and communication sources impact on behavioural intention, based on the results of previous factor analysis.

The findings revealed statistically significant relationships between BI and the following variables: economic and environmental benefits (BEN1:  $\beta=0.356^{***}$ ), KNOW ( $\beta=0.234$ ), SAT ( $\beta=1.502^{***}$ ), environmental-related concern (FSC1:  $\beta=0.381$ ), and informal sources (COMM4:  $\beta=0.132$ ). This provided response to our RQ1, investigating the way intrinsic and extrinsic motivations, as well as communications sources, influence the consumer intention to buy and consume LF. Specifically, H1, H4 and H5 have been partially confirmed, while H2 and H3 have been fully confirmed (Table 5).

The coefficient of determination ( $R^2$ ) values, assessing the variance in the endogenous variable explained by the exogenous ones and the overall model predictivity [68], were between 0.58 and 0.88, suggesting an adequate model's explanatory power (Table 3).

Table 5. The structural model.

Hypothesis Path	Coefficient	St. Err.	z-value <sup>1</sup>	p-value	Hypotheses acceptance (Yes/No/ Partially)
<b>H1: BEN -&gt; BI</b>					Partially
BEN1 -> BI	.356***	.089	4.017	.000	
BEN2 -> BI	-.041	.079	.517	.605	
BEN3 -> BI	-.132	.076	-1.745	.081	
BEN4 -> BI	-.074	.088	-.842	.400	
<b>H2: KNOW -&gt; BI</b>	.234**	.070	3.370	.001	Yes
<b>H3: SAT -&gt; BI</b>	1.502***	.101	14.908	.000	Yes
<b>H4: FSC -&gt; BI</b>					Partially
FSC1 -> BI	.381*	.148	2.571	.010	
FSC2 -> BI	-.298	.121	-2.463	.114	
FSC3 -> BI	.080	.084	.960	.337	
<b>H5: COMM -&gt; BI</b>					Partially
COMM1 -> BI	-.089	.053	-1.671	.095	
COMM2 -> BI	.047	.068	.683	.494	
COMM3 -> BI	-.081	.071	-1.137	.255	
COMM4 -> BI	.132**	0.048	2.775	.006	

<sup>1</sup> \*\*\* = p-value<.001, \*\*=p-value<.01, \*=p-value<.05.

Thereafter, to assess the second research question (RQ2) of this study, a second run of SEM was performed, by analysing the mediating role of FSC.

By following Hair et al. [68], mediation occurs when (i) the dependent variable (i.e., BI) and the investigated mediator (i.e., FSC) are significantly related to the independent ones (i.e., BEN, KNOW, SAT) and (ii) the indirect effects between the dependent and independent variables (after having introduced the mediating variable) are significant. Accordingly, the mediation analysis was restricted to environmental-related concern (FSC1) as a mediator on the relationships between behavioural intention (BI) and economic and environmental benefits (BEN1), knowledge (KNOW), and satisfaction (SAT).

Table 6 shows the results. FSC1 was positively related to BEN1, KNOW and SAT, satisfying the first criterion of Hair et al. [68]. On the other hand, the indirect effects were significant only for BEN1 and KNOW. Therefore, the mediating role of FSC1 on the relationship between SAT and BI was excluded. Assessing the mediation intensity by the Variance Accounted For (VAF) index [68], it emerged that a partial mediation of FSC1 can be confirmed only for the relationship between BI and BEN1 (25%). That is, the perception of LFs benefits improves the intention to consume them especially when individuals are concerned with environmental-related issues. Hence, sustainability concern is critical for improving the overall influence of LF benefits on consumers buying intention.

Table 6. Analysis of indirect effects and mediator effect assessment<sup>1</sup>.

Hypothesis Path	Coefficient	St. Err.	z-value	p-value
Path estimations without mediator				
BEN1 > FSC1	.810***	.069	11.745	.000
KNOW > FSC1	.214**	.070	3.051	.002
SAT > FSC1	-.079	.074	-1.069	.285
Indirect effects				
Indirect effect1: BEN1 > FSC > BI	.131**	.050	2.601	.009
Total1	.524***	.109	4.790	.000
Indirect effect2: KNOW > FSC > BI	.035*	.017	1.975	.048
Total2	.279***	.072	3.887	.000

<sup>1</sup> VAF = indirect effect / total effect x 100. VAF<.20: no mediation; .20<VAF<.80: partial mediation; VAF>.80: full mediation (Hair et al., 2014).

5. Discussion and implications

The findings suggest that respondents’ behavioural intention towards LF is mainly affected by their perception of economic and environmental benefits (H1), which emerged also as the most important factor, in terms of proportional variance, from the factor analysis. Consumers recognize that LF production and consumption assure better respect for the territory of origin, the biodiversity, the animal welfare and the overall environment, and this represents a good reason for buying and consuming LF.

Both knowledge (H2) and satisfaction (H3) are positively related to behavioural intention, revealing that the more consumers are aware about LFs’ quality and benefits, the more they are willing to buy and consume them. Similarly, satisfactory past experiences with LF consumption act as a predictor of future behavioural intention.

Food sustainability concern (H4) related to environmental issues significantly impacts on behavioural intention meaning that the more consumers are concerned with environmental problems, the more they are inclined to eat locally produced food. Indeed, they also associate local food to several environmental benefits.

The role of external communication (H5) appears quite scant: despite the factorial structure suggested the importance of specialized and mass communication, the SEM analysis highlighted the significant impact of informal sources (i.e., communication conveyed by relatives and friends) on behavioural intention, thus stressing the role of social norms and influences on LF choices.

Further insights emerged from the investigation of the relationships between food sustainability concerns and the intrinsic factors influencing behavioural intention. Findings revealed that economic and environmental benefits associated to LF, personal knowledge and the use of informal communication sources are positively related to food sustainability concern, while satisfaction did not. That is, the more consumers perceive the environmental-related benefits of LF, are recommended to consume them by their relatives and friend, and are able to recognize and distinguish LFs from generic ones, the more they become sensitive to food sustainability issues. In turn, such involvement in environmental concern act as a potential mediator (H6) highlighting the important role of extrinsic motivations besides intrinsic ones.

Several implications can be drawn from the findings of this study.

From a theoretical perspective, the results contribute significantly to the existing literature on LF consumption by offering a comprehensive framework that integrates both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations for LF consumption, an approach that has been previously underexplored. Previous research, indeed, predominantly focused on isolated aspects, such as environmental benefits, economic impacts, and health advantages. For instance, studies by Feldmann and Hamm [35] and Pearson et al. [73] emphasized the environmental benefits of reduced food miles and the economic support of local producers. Other scholars emphasized the importance of intrinsic motivations that are strictly related to LF properties including freshness, nutritional value, taste and healthiness [13–16]. A significant attention was also put on psychological and cultural factors, such as health consciousness and ethical considerations [74]. While these studies provided valuable insights, they

tend to compartmentalize factors rather than considering their interrelationships and cumulative effects, thus limiting the understanding of their influence on consumer choices.

By applying Self-Determination Theory (SDT), this study elucidates how different motivational factors, of both intrinsic and extrinsic nature, interact to influence young consumers' intentions to purchase and consume LF. This holistic approach provides a more nuanced understanding of consumer patterns, as it considers the complex interplay between several motivational dimensions [12,19].

Furthermore, this research underscores the mediating role of food sustainability concern (FSC) in enhancing the predictive power of intrinsic motivations on behavioural intentions. By demonstrating that FSC can partially mediate the relationship between perceived LF benefits and behavioural intention, the findings highlight the importance of sustainability considerations in driving consistent and long-term LF consumption. This result corroborates the basic assumption of Self-Determination Theory, suggesting that extrinsic motivations can reinforce and stabilize intrinsic motivations over time [21]. Notably, it is particularly relevant as it aligns with broader sustainability goals and adds depth to our understanding of how extrinsic factors can reinforce intrinsic motivations [22].

This holistic perspective not only contributes to academic knowledge but also aids policymakers and marketers in promoting LF more effectively.

Firstly, emphasizing the economic and environmental benefits of LF can effectively resonate with young consumers' values and enhance their intention to purchase and consume these foods. Marketing strategies should therefore highlight how LF supports local economies, reduces carbon footprints, and promotes biodiversity [6,35]. For instance, companies can create campaigns that feature local farmers and their sustainable practices, showcasing the direct impact of consumer purchases on the community. An example could be a video series on social media that follows the journey of LF from farm to table, highlighting the environmental benefits and local economic support.

Moreover, enhancing consumer knowledge about LF can significantly boost their purchasing intentions. Companies can achieve this through educational campaigns that inform consumers about the health benefits, freshness, and superior quality of LF. Utilizing various communication channels, including social media, blogs, and in-store promotions, can help disseminate this information effectively [15]. For example, grocery stores could host cooking demonstrations and tasting events featuring local chefs who prepare dishes using LF, coupled with informative sessions about the nutritional benefits and origins of the ingredients used. In addition, considering the impact of informal and personal communication on consumers' intention to consume LF, companies can create community-based programs that facilitate informal communication and knowledge sharing about LF. For example, firms can organize neighborhood potluck events where participants bring dishes made with LF, providing opportunities for people to share recipes, cooking tips, and personal experiences with LF. These gatherings can strengthen community bonds and enhance collective knowledge about the benefits of LF. Another approach is to engage local influencers and community leaders who can act as ambassadors for LF. These individuals can share their positive experiences and knowledge about LF through social media, local events, and community meetings, thereby leveraging their influence to reach a broader audience. For instance, a well-respected local chef could host a series of cooking classes or workshops focusing on LF, which could be promoted through both online platforms and local community centers. Lastly, educational institutions can play a pivotal role in enhancing informal communication about LF. Schools and universities can integrate LF topics into their curricula and organize educational field trips to local farms. These activities can increase students' knowledge and interest in LF, which they are likely to share with their families and peers, thus spreading awareness and appreciation for LF within their communities.

Other implications derive from the critical role of satisfaction in shaping future behaviours suggesting that ensuring high-quality products and positive consumer experiences should be a priority for LF producers and retailers. Providing consistent product quality, fostering direct interactions between consumers and producers, and offering taste tests or sample promotions can be

critical to enhance consumer satisfaction and loyalty [49]. For example, farmers' markets could implement a "Meet the Farmer" day where consumers can directly interact with the producers, learn about their farming practices, and sample their produce. This can build trust and satisfaction, encouraging repeat purchases.

Finally, the finding that extrinsic motivations, i.e., food sustainability concern (FSC), act as a mediator for intrinsic motivations, while supporting the basic foundations of the SDT framework, implies that business efforts to foster intrinsic motivations can be more effective when coupled with strategies that enhance extrinsic motivations (e.g., promoting the environmental and social benefits of LF consumption). For instance, marketing campaigns can simultaneously highlight the superior taste and freshness of LF while also underscoring how purchasing LF supports local farmers and reduces environmental impact. This dual approach can lead to more persistent and consistent consumer behaviour, as individuals who initially choose LF for intrinsic reasons (e.g., health and taste) may develop a stronger, more stable commitment when they also recognize the broader extrinsic benefits. Therefore, businesses should design comprehensive marketing strategies that integrate both intrinsic and extrinsic appeals. For example, loyalty programs that reward customers for purchasing LF can further reinforce these motivations. Such programs could offer points not only for buying LF but also for participating in sustainability-related activities, such as attending workshops on reducing food waste or supporting local environmental initiatives.

## 6. Conclusions

This study advances the understanding of local food (LF) consumption among young consumers by integrating both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations within a comprehensive framework, guided by Self-Determination Theory (SDT). The findings highlight the significant roles of perceived LF benefits, consumer knowledge, satisfaction, and food sustainability concern (FSC) in shaping behavioral intentions. Furthermore, the mediating effect of FSC underscores the importance of combining intrinsic and extrinsic motivations to foster sustained consumer behavior.

However, this study is not without limitations. Firstly, the research relies on self-reported data, which may be subject to social desirability bias and inaccuracies in recall. Future research could address this limitation by incorporating observational or experimental methodologies to validate self-reported behaviors. Secondly, the study focuses on young consumers in Italy, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other age groups and cultural contexts. Future studies should explore LF consumption patterns across diverse demographics and geographic regions to enhance the applicability of the results. Moreover, while the study integrates various motivational factors, it does not extensively explore the potential interactions between these factors and other psychological constructs such as attitudes and subjective norms. Future research could examine these interactions to provide a more holistic understanding of the determinants of LF consumption. Lastly, the study does not consider external factors such as availability and accessibility of LF, which could significantly influence consumption behaviour. Investigating how these external factors interact with intrinsic and extrinsic motivations could offer more comprehensive insights for promoting LF consumption.

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**Institutional Review Board Statement:** The entire research procedure adhered to the Ethical Committee's guidelines of Urbino University, aligned with European data security and protection standards.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study. Before starting the questionnaire, participants were informed of the research's scope and their right to decline participation at any time.

**Data Availability Statement:** The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author due to privacy reasons.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Appendix A

Table A1. Measures.

Variables	Id	Items	References
BEHAVIOURAL INTENTION (BI)	BI1	I intend to keep eating more local food	[63,66]
	BI2	The likelihood that I would recommend local food to a friend is high	
	BI3	The probability that I will choose local food is high	
	LF1	Local food provides fresher and better tasting	
	LF2	Local food provides better health and nutrition	
	LF3	Local food improves agricultural production and economy in the region	
	LF4	Local food respects the environment	
LOCAL FOOD BENEFITS (BEN)	LF5	Local food fosters environmentally friendly production method	[60–62]
	LF6	Local food improves the safety	
	LF7	Local food contributes to conserving local traditions	
	LF8	Local food contributes to conserving traditional agricultural landscape	
	LF9	Local food fosters environmentally friendly production methods	
	LF10	Local foods is critical for conserving traditional production and techniques	
	LF11	Local foods is critical for conserving local culture	
KNOWLEDGE ON LOCAL FOOD (KNOW)	K1	I am knowledgeable about local foods	[63,64,75]
	K2	I have more knowledge of local foods than my friends	
	K3	I am confident in knowing which food is local.	
SATISFACTION ABOUT LOCAL FOOD (SAT)	S1	I am satisfied with local food	[63,65]
	S2	Considering all my experiences with foods, my local food choices are wise	
	S3	Overall, I am pleased with local food based on my experience	
	FSC1	It is packaged in an environmentally friendly way	
FOOD SUSTAINABILITY CONCERN (FSC)	FSC2	It is produced without the use of pesticides	[22]
	FSC3	It is produced in a way that respects biodiversity	
	FSC4	It is produced in an unspoilt environment	
	FSC5	It is obtained in an environmentally friendly way	
	FSC6	It is produced respecting animal welfare	
	FSC7	It is grown using sustainable agricultural practices	
	FSC8	It is produced in respect of human rights	
	FSC9	It is sold at a fair price for the producer	
	FSC10	It is locally produced to support local farmers	
	C1	Conversation with relatives	
COMMUNICATION SOURCES (COMM)	C2	Conversation with friends	[67]
	C3	Process certifications	
	C4	Product certifications	
	C5	Scientific study on local food sustainability	
	C6	Scientific study on local food safety	
	C7	Article on a specialized Journal	
	C8	Article on daily press	
	C9	TV	
	C10	Social networks	
	C11	Government and institutional communication	

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