Social Representations and Ambivalence in Sustainable Food Consumption: A Focus Group Study on Contemporary Scenarios and Psychosocial Barriers

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Abstract

The study investigates how social representations and ambivalence shape attitudes towards eco-sustainable food consumption through three focus groups (n = 21, 52% female; mean age = 28.10, *SD* = 9.34). Qualitative analysis highlighted not only practical and attitudinal barriers, such as limited availability of these products, skepticism towards green advertising, but also ambivalence toward various topics, such as the balance between tradition and culinary innovation. For example, participants co-constructed green food as both a ethical imperative and a practical challenge, revealing how shared meanings and tensions influence the gap between purchase intention and behavior. Additionally, the study adopts a community psychology perspective, emphasizing how collective efficacy and social norms shape sustainable choices. The results underscore the need to promote collective efficacy and empowerment through collective initiatives, transforming sustainable consumption from an individual responsibility to a shared social practice for the common good.

Keywords: green food, focus groups, explicit attitudes, green attitude-behavior gap, green food purchase behavior

Riassunto. ***Rappresentazioni sociali e ambivalenza nel consumo alimentare sostenibile: uno studio tramite focus group sugli scenari contemporanei e le barriere psicosociali***

Lo studio indaga come le rappresentazioni sociali e l'ambivalenza influenzino gli atteggiamenti verso il consumo alimentare ecosostenibile attraverso tre focus group (n = 21, 52% femmine; media età = 28,10, sd = 9,34). L'analisi qualitativa ha evidenziato non solo barrie-

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re pratiche e di atteggiamento, come la disponibilità limitata di questi prodotti e lo scetticismo verso la pubblicità green, ma anche ambivalenza verso vari argomenti, come l'equilibrio tra tradizione e innovazione culinaria. Ad esempio, i partecipanti hanno co-costruito la rappresentazione del consumo di cibo eco-sostenibile sia come imperativo etico sia come sfida pratica, rivelando come significati condivisi influenzino il divario tra intenzione e comportamento d'acquisto. Inoltre, lo studio adotta una prospettiva di psicologia di comunità, sottolineando come l'efficacia collettiva e le norme sociali influenzino le scelte ecosostenibili. I risultati sottolineano la necessità di promuovere l'efficacia collettiva e l'empowerment attraverso iniziative condivise, trasformando il consumo sostenibile da responsabilità individuale a pratica sociale comune.

Parole chiave: cibo ecosostenibile, focus group, atteggiamenti espliciti, divario intenzione-comportamento

1. Introduction

The current environmental crisis, characterized by climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution, poses significant risks to ecosystems and human health. Food production contributes substantially to global greenhouse gas emissions, accounting for approximately one-quarter of all human-induced emissions (Poore & Nemecek, 2018). In particular, animal-derived foods represent the most environmentally taxing foods due to their high greenhouse gas emissions (Springmann *et al.*, 2018). Given these impacts, promoting green food purchasing behaviors emerges as an essential strategy for reducing the ecological footprint of food consumption and supporting environmental sustainability (Vermeir & Verbeke, 2008).

The term "green food" is defined as food that has been produced or processed in a way that has a reduced environmental impact throughout its entire life cycle, from production to waste disposal, compared to other products within the same category (Gil, 2000). This definition aligns with broader conceptualizations of sustainable consumption, which emphasize not only environmental but also social and economic dimensions (e.g., fair trade, local economies) (Bradley *et al.*, 2025). Despite a growing interest in pro-environmental products and environmental concern among consumers worldwide, research consistently reveals a discrepancy between declared intention and actual purchasing behavior (ElHaffar *et al.*, 2020). This phenomenon is known as the "Green Attitude-Behavior Gap" (GABG; Park & Lin, 2020). The GABG has been widely documented across various domains of sustainable consumption, from organic to eco-labeled products (see Zhuo *et al.*, 2022, for a review). Historically, research on sustainable food consumption has evolved from a narrow focus on individual attitudes (e.g., the Theory of Planned Behavior, Ajzen, 1991) to more holistic mod-

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els that incorporate contextual and systemic factors (e.g., the socio-ecological model, Bronfenbrenner, 1979). For instance, while early studies emphasized the role of personal values and knowledge in driving green purchases (e.g., Diamantopoulos *et al.*, 2003), later work has highlighted the importance of structural barriers (e.g., high prices, limited availability) and social norms (e.g., peer influence, cultural traditions) **(**Kennedy & Hauslik, 2018**;** Bradley *et al.*, 2025**).** Despite this evolution, most of the studies currently available still focus on individual-level determinants, such as attitudes, perceived behavioral control, and personal norms (Sharma *et al.*, 2023), often overlooking the social and cultural dimensions that shape consumer behavior (Adhikari *et al.*, 2025). In the present study we consider individual variables influencing the GABG as part of an overarching system of co-constructed social representations, in which individual and collective forces converge in shaping people's attitudes.

Regarding individual-level theories, Danner and Thøgersen (2022) delineated two potential pathways through which green purchase decisions are made. In the first pathway, as postulated by the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991), consumers make a conscious decision, based on their attitudes and intentions, regarding the purchase of a product when sufficient motivation, ability, and opportunity are present. In the second pathway, when the aforementioned three factors are lacking, the purchase action will be guided by an automatically activated attitude, as postulated by Fazio (1990). These two pathways are also in line with Kahneman's Dual Process Theory (Kahneman, 2011), which theorizes the existence of a fast, automatic, and intuitive path (System 1), and a slow, deliberate, and analytical path (System 2). It is therefore reasonable to posit that consumers encounter both pathways when purchasing green food. This dual-process framework has been increasingly applied to sustainable consumption, suggesting that green choices may be driven by both automatic processes (e.g., habits, emotional reactions) and deliberative ones (e.g., moral reasoning, cost-benefit analysis) (Abrahamse, 2020; Sharma *et al.*, 2023). However, the model has been criticized for its individualistic focus, which fails to account for the socially constructed nature of many behaviors, including food choices. In fact, most studies on Dual Process Theory have focused on individual decision-making, neglecting how social contexts may amplify or suppress certain cognitive pathways (Spaargaren & Van Vliet, 2000; Adhikari *et al.*, 2025). Hence, the interplay between automatic and deliberative processes in the context of social interactions, such as group discussions, remains underexplored, although, as said, research on sustainable food consumption has evolved from a narrow focus on individual attitudes (e.g., the Theory of Planned Behavior, Ajzen, 1991) to more comprehensive models

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that incorporate contextual and systemic factors (e.g., the socio-ecological model, Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Summarizing, while individual-level theories provide valuable insights on green purchase decision-making mechanisms, they often overlook the social and cultural dimensions of food choices. To address this gap, we adopted a broader perspective that considers eco-sustainable consumption as a social practice, rather than solely an individual choice. In fact, food choices are often shaped by shared cultural values, family traditions, and peer influences, which can either facilitate or hinder the adoption of green practices (Goel *et al.*, 2023; Stevens, 2014). In this regard, a community psychology perspective offers a robust framework by shifting the focus toward a socio-ecological model (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), emphasizing the interdependence between individuals and their social environments, and highlighting how collective efficacy, social capital, and community norms shape behavior (Bandura, 2000; Adhikari *et al.*, 2025). This perspective is particularly relevant for understanding green food consumption, as it underscores the role of shared resources (e.g., local markets, community gardens) and collective actions (e.g., Solidarity Purchase Groups) in enabling sustainable choices (Dal Gobbo & Forno, 2020).

Here, food choices are viewed as nested within multiple levels of influence, where individual intentions must find a "person-environment fit" within the resources and norms of their local context. This multi-level approach enriches traditional behavioral models, which often treat individuals as isolated decision-makers (Poelman & Steenhuis, 2019). This shift aligns with Social Representations Theory (Moscovici, 1984), which posits attitudes formation (e.g. towards sustainability) are not just individual processes, but are co-constructed shared meaning within social groups to navigate the complexities of the world (e.g., the environmental crisis). Social representations are dynamic systems of values, ideas, and practices that allow individuals to communicate, interpret, and act upon their social world (Jodelet, 2008). In the context of green food, social representations can help explain how consumers collectively make sense of complex issues such as sustainability, organic labeling, or greenwashing. For example, an ambivalent social representation of green food as "ethical but expensive" may emerge from group discussions, reflecting both the perceived barriers (cost) and the moral value (ethics) associated with sustainable consumption (Bernabéu *et al.*, 2023). The literature on social representations and sustainable consumption is still emerging: while some studies have explored how social representations shape environmental attitudes (e.g., Castro & Batel, 2008), few have applied this framework to food choices, although some qualitative insights from Austria and Slovenia are available (Golob *et*

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al., 2024). Moreover, the role of ambivalence, a central concept in social psychology (Thompson & Zanna, 1995), has been overlooked in the context of sustainable consumption (Tam *et al.*, 2019). Understanding these tensions is crucial for addressing the GABG, as they may explain why consumers who value sustainability do not always translate their attitudes into actions.

Modifying food consumption represents a significant challenge due to the multitude of factors influencing dietary patterns (Vermeulen *et al.*, 2020). These include structural constraints encompassing socioeconomic, environmental, political (Kenny *et al.*, 2023; Stok *et al.*, 2017), and corporate forces that influence food-related behaviors (Béné, 2022). These constraints highlight how equitable access to sustainable options is often restricted by systemic inequalities, transforming food choice into a matter of community resilience and equity. The decisions we make regarding our dietary habits are contingent upon a multitude of personal characteristics, including attitudes, knowledge, skills, emotions, and the sociocultural context within which each individual is immersed. Additionally, structural and environmental factors play a pivotal role in shaping our food choice architecture (Leng *et al.*, 2017).

This study addresses the literature gap about shared and group dynamics of green food consumption by adopting a social representations perspective (Moscovici, 1984) to explore how shared meanings and ambivalence emerge in group discussions, shaping the green attitude-behavior gap within a community psychology framework. This gap is particularly evident in the Italian context, where food is deeply tied to cultural identity and traditions, yet little research has examined how these cultural factors interact with sustainability concerns (Goel *et al.*, 2023). We do so by adopting a qualitative approach to deepen the understanding of the social representations of eco-sustainable food consumption and the GABG, as suggested by a recent literature review (Megha, 2024). We employed three Focus Groups on a sample of Italian adult consumers. Addressing both the individual and social variables we mentioned earlier, our research questions were: what are the attitudes and green consumption habits of Italian consumers regarding eco-sustainable food products? And which factors, individual and collective, limit equitable access to green food for all members of the community?".

1.1 Using Focus Groups to Study Sustainable Food Consumption

Focus groups are a research method widely used to explore attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors in a dynamic and interactive setting (Morgan,

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1996, Krueger & Casey, 2015). One of the main advantages of focus groups is their ability to provide rich, detailed data within a relatively short timeframe, offering a dynamic understanding of group norms, shared attitudes, and divergent views (Barbour, 2024). Beyond being a mere data collection method, the focus groups served as a participatory space for dialogue and critical reflection. In this setting, participants did not just report individual opinions but actively co-constructed social meanings regarding sustainability, negotiating the tensions between their personal habits and broader societal expectations (Amir *et al.*, 2024). This method is therefore particularly suited to our study, as it allows us to observe how social representations and ambivalence are co-constructed in real time through group interactions.

To conduct a qualitative analysis of the perceived green attitude-behavior gap regarding green food, we selected influential factors from the extant literature to present to participants, as listed and described below.

- Green food choice motives: this construct represents the underlying reasons driving consumers' food preferences and consumption behaviors (Onwezen *et al.*, 2019). While factors such as environmental consciousness can facilitate the adoption of sustainable dietary choices, perceived barriers (such as high prices) also exist (Verain *et al.*, 2016). The existence of potential trade-offs among various food choice drivers underscores the need to explore sustainable consumer motivations (Johnston *et al.*, 2014).
- Perceived green attitude-behavior gap: this construct refers to the perceived discrepancy between a positive attitude toward green products and people's actual purchase behavior of these products (Park & Lin, 2020).
- Perceived behavioral control: this is one of the main predictors of behavior hypothesized by the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991), which in a community context is linked to the sense of empowerment or learned helplessness in the face of global crises.
- Green habits: habit can be defined as the semi-automatic performance of well-learned behaviors (Charng *et al.*, 1988). As aforementioned, in some cases, behavior is guided less by attitudes and intentions and more by the automaticity of stimulus-and-response (Verplanken & Wood, 2006).
- Green food premium price: it refers to the fact that the price of green food is typically higher than that of conventional food products. This is due to the additional processing costs (Aygen Ispahi, 2022). Consumers may view this premium price as an indicator of quality or they may perceive it as an unnecessary expense (Premadasa & Fernando, 2022).

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- Emotional reactions: the literature provides compelling evidence that emotions exert a direct influence on consumer behavior, particularly in the context of green purchasing (Wang & Wu, 2016), where feelings of collective guilt or social indignation can act as drivers for change.
- Attitudes toward green marketing: although some authors report that sentiments toward green marketing are increasingly positive worldwide (Iannuzzi, 2024), others argue that, due to greenwashing, consumers may have developed negative attitudes toward green products and a distrust of information provided by advertising (Manuel *et al.*, 2014).
- Individual responsibility in eco-sustainability: the responsibility for environmental sustainability is multifaceted, involving individuals, organizations, and governments. Each plays a crucial role in fostering sustainable practices and mitigating environmental degradation (Fetting, 2020). The concept of self-efficacy, proposed by Bandura (1977), refers to an individual's belief in their capacity to execute an action in order to achieve a successful outcome. Green self-efficacy is the belief in individuals' ability to perform a given task in order to achieve environmental goals (Chen *et al.*, 2015).
- Alternative appealing names: meat is the most polluting kind of food. Several factors have been identified by consumers as barriers to reducing meat consumption. These include enjoyment of meat, perceived importance of meat for nutrition, preference for familiar foods and lack of knowledge and skills involving vegetarian food (Lea *et al.*, 2006; Pohjolainen *et al.*, 2015). Additionally, plant-based options are occasionally framed as the healthier alternative, which may contribute to the perception that they are less tasty (Raghunathan *et al.*, 2006) or less filling (Suher *et al.*, 2016). One simple, cost-effective way to influence consumer preferences is to modify the terminology used to describe different food items (Wansink *et al.*, 2001; Swahn *et al.*, 2012). For instance, the use of indulgent descriptions for vegetables has been demonstrated to significantly increase the number of people selecting these options (Turnwald *et al.*, 2017). Similarly, the inclusion of vegetarian dishes in the main part of a restaurant menu, rather than in a separate vegetarian section, has been shown to significantly increase their sales (Bacon & Krpan, 2018). Thus, modifying the language and framing of plant-based dishes can be an accessible, cost-effective strategy for achieving sustainable dietary patterns (Vennard *et al.*, 2018).

We aimed to gather rich, nuanced, and multilayered insights into the specific issue of sustainable food consumption through social interactions in a group setting. This method is particularly effective for exploring complex issues, generating ideas, and understanding participants' attitudes and

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experiences (Ho, 2024). Given the large amount of quantitative research on the topic, we thought it might be interesting to supplement this body of data with firsthand consumers' opinions.

2. Methods

2.1 Design and Procedures

In this study, we conducted three online focus groups with 21 adult consumers recruited from the general population via researchers' personal contacts. The sample was selected based on disparate socio-demographic parameters, including age, gender, and educational status, in accordance with the principle of maximum diversity (Kumari *et al.*, 2021). Inclusion criteria for participating in the studies were being 18 years of age or older and having the opportunity to buy food at least occasionally.

Three Focus Groups were conducted online and lasted approximately two hours each. The first focus group had 6 participants, the second 7, and the third 8. Different people were involved in each focus group. One of the authors moderated the discussion by giving cues and encouraging free speech among participants. A structured discussion guide with the questions and food images was used to direct the focus group. The guide also included a thorough definition of what "green food" is, and the moderator first explained and answered questions about this concept to avoid confusion among participants.

This study employed a qualitative thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006), with quantitative elements to support the interpretation of themes, adopting a hybrid (deductive-inductive) orientation. Deductive themes were derived from the literature (e.g., "barriers", "facilitators", "green attitude-behavior gap"), while inductive sub-themes emerged from the data (e.g., "defense of tradition", "culinary innovation"). The frequency of codes was counted to identify prevalent patterns, but the primary focus remained on the interpretative analysis of themes as coherent patterns of meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2006). No qualitative software was used; coding was managed manually using Excel spreadsheets. While our approach included quantitative counting of codes (e.g., percentages reported in Table 2), it was fundamentally grounded in the thematic analysis tradition, which prioritizes the identification and interpretation of themes as patterns of shared meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2021). This aligns with Braun and Clarke's (2006) emphasis on flexibility in thematic analysis, which can accommodate both inductive and deductive elements, as well as quantitative support for qualitative insights.

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This study was approved by the Ethical Research Committee of the University of Bologna (protocol number 0173519). All participants signed an informed consent form before the focus group, which included a commitment to the confidentiality of the information discussed. The focus groups were audio-recorded, and participants' identities were anonymized.

2.2 Participants

Participants were 21 adult Italians consumers. The 52% were females; the age range was 21 to 67 years (mean = 28.10, *SD* = 9.34). Despite our effort to recruit people with different characteristics, the educational level was largely skewed towards university education (see Table 1).

Tab. 1 – Education level

Education level	*N*	*%*
High school diploma	6	28.6%
Bachelor's degree	14	66.7%
Postgraduate training	1	4.8%

2.3 Questions and stimuli about influential factors

To address green food choice motives, we asked: "What is your motivation for buying green food?"; "What do you think are the aspects that can positively influence your decision to buy green food?"; "What are the barriers to buying green food?"; "When you are at a restaurant, do you usually order vegetarian or vegan dishes? Why?" The last question was added to evaluate food choice motives in another setting in addition to the grocery store, i.e. restaurants.

To address the perceived green attitude-behavior gap, the following question was asked to participants: "Is there, in your opinion, a discrepancy between your intention to buy green food and your actual purchases? Why?". For the perceived behavioral control, we asked: "Would you be able, if you wanted to, to start buying green food?"; "Can you identify green food products when you are shopping in stores or online? Why? Why not?".

To stimulate the discussion about green habits, we asked: "Are you in the habit of buying green food? What do you usually buy?"; "Before you buy food, do you check whether it meets green standards?".

To address the issue of green food premium price we asked: "Do you think green food is worth the extra financial effort? What do you think about it?".

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Concerning the emotional reactions to green food, we asked participants to identify potentially greenwashed food products from a set of images including both genuinely sustainable and potentially misleading products. The selected images were intentionally difficult to distinguish based on their sustainability cues. For instance, participants were shown tuna cans displaying labels that could be perceived as environmentally friendly despite ongoing criticism of their meaning or effectiveness. One example was the "Dolphin-Safe" label, which has been criticized for leading consumers to believe that the product does not harm marine ecosystems, even though it only means that a particular fishing method was not used in a particular fishing area. A product may, in fact, be labeled "dolphin-safe" only if an independent observer verifies that no dolphins were harmed (Balance *et al.*, 2021). Another example was the "Marine Stewardship Council (MSC)" label, which is intended to indicate sustainable fishing practices but has been criticized for insufficient evidence of its environmental benefits (Ponte, 2012). The rationale behind this choice was twofold: (1) to simulate the ambiguity consumers face in real-world purchasing situations when greenwashing is often subtle and difficult to detect; (2) to elicit the experience of potential deception, regardless of whether participants correctly identified the greenwashed product. Immediately after the task, participants were informed about the controversies surrounding the labels displayed on the products and were invited to reflect on their emotional reactions upon learning that at least one of the products was not genuinely sustainable. In this way, we aimed to explore not only participants' ability to detect greenwashing, but also the emotions elicited by realizing they had been misled despite their good intentions. Moreover, we informed them about some little-known food production processes that consume far more resources than one would expect. For instance, one of the foods considered was quinoa, whose production process harms people and ecosystems (Palomino *et al.*, 2023). Then we asked them: "Did you know that these foods had such a great impact on the environment? What do you think about it? How does this new awareness make you feel?" This second exposure aimed to explore participants' evaluations of and emotional responses to newly acquired information about the environmental impact of food production.

In order to explore Attitudes Toward Green Marketing, we asked: "What do you think about green advertising? How do you judge these ads?"; "What would you like to read or see (pictures, colors, symbols, etc.) on the packaging of a green product in order to have more incentive to buy it?".

To address the individual responsibility in eco-sustainability we asked: "Who do you consider to be primarily responsible for environmental protection? Why?".

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To explore people's opinions about alternative appealing names, we showed participants some vegetarian dishes (e.g., a vegetable lasagna, see Figure 1) and then we asked them: "What would you call these vegetarian dishes to make them more inviting? In your opinion, if they were called that, would you order them more?".

Fig. 1 – Vegetarian lasagna showed during the focus groups



2.4 Data Analysis

To analyze the focus group content, we used an adaptation of Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis, incorporating quantitative counting of codes while maintaining a focus on theme interpretation. According to the authors' definition, thematic analysis involves identifying recurrent patterns of meaning within a given dataset, which can be conceptualized as themes. Although thematic analysis, as conceptualized by Braun & Clarke (2006), is commonly associated with an inductive, data-driven approach, the method is inherently flexible and can also be applied in a theory-driven manner, as they themselves acknowledge. In this study, we adopted a predominantly deductive approach: themes and codes were developed from prior theoretical constructs in consumer behavior and green consumption, with the aim of examining how participants' discourse reflected, reinforced, or challenged these dimensions in a constructivist way. This analytical choice was motivated by the exploratory-confirmatory nature of our research questions, which sought to test the resonance of established frameworks within qualita-

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tive narratives. Nevertheless, while the thematic structure was informed by existing theory, we remained open to emergent subthemes and unexpected insights, which were incorporated iteratively during coding. This hybrid orientation allowed us to maintain analytical consistency while also capturing the richness and variability of the data. Transcripts were manually coded through an iterative process of assigning meaningful text segments to the predefined coding framework, while allowing for the inclusion of emergent subthemes where appropriate. No qualitative software was used; coding was managed manually using spreadsheets. No qualitative data analysis software was used; coding was managed manually using Excel spreadsheets.

Participants' answers were represented schematically in codes, together with the frequency of the response and the corresponding percentage of the total of 21 participants. This method is in accordance with the one from Onwuegbuzie *et al.* (2009) as it combines thematic coding with the quantification of response frequencies, providing both qualitative depth and quantitative rigor. In line with their recommendations, multiple types of data were collected beyond verbal transcripts. Moreover, by quantifying the occurrence of themes, the approach follows the authors' suggestion to enhance the rigor of qualitative research by incorporating elements of descriptive statistics, such as response counts and percentages, to better capture group-level patterns.

3. Results

The thematic analysis of the three focus groups resulted in the summary of participants' responses represented in Table 2.

Subsequently, we grouped the codes in themes according to their meaning and similarity as represented in Table 3. The "Facilitators" and "Barriers" categories were, in turn, divided into sub-categories (sub-themes). This further classification allowed us to grasp additional interesting variables of interest that emerged from the focus groups.

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Tab. 2 – Focus groups' participants' schematic answers (codes) and corresponding questions and investigated variables

Variable	*Questions*	*Codes (number, %)*
Green Food Choice Motives	"What is your motivation for buying green food?";	Environment protection (20, 95.2%), health benefits (7, 33.3%), better quality (4, 19%), market influence (2, 9.5%), animal welfare (1, 4.8%), resources conservation (2, 9.5%), local economy support (1, 4.8%), future generations' wellbeing (2, 9.5%), culinary innovation (1, 4.8%).
	"What do you think are the aspects that can positively influence your decision to buy green food?"	Price (15, 71.4%), recognizability (10, 47.6%), awareness campaigns (6, 28.6%), reliable eco-labels (6, 28.6%), greater availability (3, 14.3%).
	"What are the barriers to buying green food?"	Price (10, 47.6%), unclear labels (6, 28.6%), taste (1, 4.8%), aesthetics (1, 4.8%), defense of the tradition (1, 4.8%), little availability (4, 19%), lack of time (4, 19%).
	"When you are at a restaurant, do you usually order vegetarian or vegan dishes? Why?"	Yes (9, 42.8%), no (6, 28.6%). Dietary choices (4, 19%), taste (3, 14.3%), culinary innovation (2, 9.5%), little availability (1, 4.8%), curiosity (1, 4.8%).
Perceived Attitude-Behavior Gap	"Is there, in your opinion, a discrepancy between your intention to buy green food and your actual purchases?"	Yes (17, 80.9%), I don't know (1, 4.8%), No (3, 14.3%)
	"Why?"	Lack of attention (5, 23.8%) lack of knowledge (4, 19%), price (4, 19%), lack of availability (1, 4.8%), lack of habit (1, 4.8%), recognizability (1, 4.8%), social norms (1, 4.8%).
Perceived Behavioral Control	"Would you be able, if you wanted to, to start buying green food?"	Partially (8, 38.1%), Yes (8, 38.1%), No (5, 23.8%).
	"Can you identify green food products when you are shopping in stores or online? Why? Why not?"	Lack of knowledge (12, 57.1%), reliable eco-labels (9, 42.8%), price, (7, 33.3%), lack of attention (2, 9.5%), lack of time (1, 4.8%).
Green Habits	"Are you in the habit of buying green food?"	Yes, for some kinds of foods (15, 71.4%), I don't know (4, 19%), No (2, 9.5%).
	"What do you usually buy?"	Fruits and vegetables (10, 47.6%), eggs (6, 28.6%), dairy (4, 19%), meat (4, 19%).

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	"Before you buy food, do you check whether it meets green standards?"	Yes (15, 71.4%), No (6, 28.6%).
Green Food Premium Price	"Do you think green food is worth the extra financial effort?"	Yes (8, 38.1%), Only if it's not too much (3, 14.3%), I don't know (10, 47.6%).
	"What do you think about it?"	Unfair (4, 19%), better quality (2, 9.5%), incentives (2, 9.5%).
Emotional Reactions	"How does this greenwashing case make you feel?"	Surprised (9, 42.8%), teased (7, 33.3%), disappointed (3, 14.3%), angry (2, 9.5%), confident (2, 9.5%), ignorant (2, 9.5%), skeptical (1, 4.8%), anxious (1, 4.8%), confused (1, 4.8%).
	"Did you know that these foods had such a great impact on the environment?"	No (9, 42.8%), Partially (5, 23.8%), Yes (1, 4.8%).
	"What do you think about it?"	Not surprised (7, 33.3%), intention to change (3, 14.3%), guilt (2, 9.5%), awareness campaigns (2, 9.5%), weird (1, 4.8%), lack of interest (1, 4.8%).
Attitudes Toward Green Marketing	"What do you think about green advertising? How do you judge these ads?"	Too infrequent (7, 33.3%), skepticism (6, 28.6%), élite (1, 4.8%), paternalistic (1, 4.8%).
	"What would you like to read or see (pictures, colors, symbols, etc.) on the packaging of a green product in order to have more incentive to buy it?"	Recognizability (5, 23.8%), simplicity (4, 19%), guaranteed certificate (4, 19%), informative (4, 19%).
Individual Responsibility in Eco-sustainability	"Who do you consider to be primarily responsible for environmental protection? Why?".	Governments (8, 38.1%), multinational firms (7, 33.3%), everyone (5, 23.8%), consumers (4, 19%).
Alternative Appealing Names	"What would you call these vegetarian dishes to make them more inviting? In your opinion, if they were called that, would you order them more?"	Defense of the tradition (9, 42.8%), vegan/vegetarian label (6, 28.6%), descriptive language (4, 19%), I don't care/I don't know (4, 19%).

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Tab. 3 – Codes' aggregation in themes and sub-themes

Theme	*Sub-Theme*	*Codes*
Facilitators	Environmentalist Motives	Environment protection, resources conservation, market influence
	Ethical Motives	Animal welfare, local economy support, future generations' wellbeing
	Openness to Novelty	Culinary innovation, curiosity
	Other Facilitators	Health benefits, reliable eco-labels, better quality, greater availability, incentives, dietary choices, price
Barriers	Lack of Resources	Lack of time, lack of attention, lack of knowledge, lack of habit
	Other Barriers	Unclear labels, little availability, taste, social norms, aesthetics, vegan/vegetarian label, price, tradition defense
Negative attitudes towards green marketing	Infrequent, skepticism, élite, paternalistic	
Desired eco-labels characteristics	Simplicity, guaranteed certificate, informative, descriptive language	

The following section presents the analysis of participants' answers to each of the influencing factors selected from the literature review.

- Green food choice motives: participants described the reasons that brought them to buy green food in the past, hence factors that already determined an eco-sustainable shift in their choices, such as the ones included in the sub-theme "Environmentalist motives, ethical motives and other facilitators". These motives reflect a social representation of green food as a collective good, where individual choices are framed within broader ethical and environmental concerns. We also investigated which factors could further encourage participants to purchase green food. These included lower prices, greater recognizability, achieved through reliable eco-labels, separate supermarket shelves dedicated to green food, awareness campaigns to inform them on how to distinguish such products from traditional ones, and greater availability of these products, which were perceived as scarce at the grocery store. Finally, we asked what, in their opinion, prevented them from consuming more green food. The perceived barriers were high prices, unclear labels, worst or unknown taste, worst aesthetics of some green foods (such as organic fruit), and the fact that, when buying food, they often lacked resources, such as time and availability of such products. This description of both moral incentives and practical obstacles reveals an ambivalence

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where green food is seen as both desirable and inaccessible. Moreover, the tension between tradition and innovation emerged as another key ambivalence. Some participants noted that to adhere to traditional Italian cuisine, specific ingredients are essential, and these ingredients are often not green. A 27-year-old female participant stated: "We Italians value traditional cuisine very much. To ensure the traditionality of a certain product, you must buy certain ingredients rather than others". On the other hand, some participants stated the opposite, saying that the desire to experiment with new ingredients in the kitchen was one of the reasons they bought green food in the past. One participant (male, 32 years old) stated: "It bothers me personally that people always come up with the same recipes from traditional cuisine, full of dairy or meat. I'd like to experiment with a new kind of nutrition". We grouped these opposite attitudes in the "Openness to novelty" sub-theme. Finally, to have a broader view on the reasons that may prevent green food consumption in another setting besides supermarkets, we also asked: "When you are at a restaurant, do you usually order vegetarian or vegan dishes?". Almost half of participants said yes (43%), bringing as motives diets that we grouped in the "Dietary choices" sub-theme (such as being vegan or vegetarian or wanting to reduce meat consumption) and curiosity, that we already mentioned as a possible facilitator to green food consumption. The reasons given for not ordering these foods at the restaurant were, again, a lack of availability and taste preferences.

- Perceived green attitude-behavior gap: most of the participants (81%) stated that they belong to the category of people who don't buy as much green food as they wish. This gap is not merely individual but reflects a social representation of green food as an ideal that is difficult to achieve in practice. The reasons were related to various sub-themes. First, the "Lack of resources" sub-theme was often mentioned. This aligns with the Dual Process Theory (Kahneman, 2011) we mentioned in the introduction paragraph, which states that people act in line with their beliefs only when they have sufficient resources available. Moreover, another factor emerged: social norms. With this term, we refer to the perceived social pressure to perform or not perform a certain behavior (Ajzen, 1991), in this case, eating traditional food. A participant (female, 25 years old) said: "When I'm at the restaurant with my friends, I don't want to be the only one eating different things". This quote illustrates how social norms, as part of the broader social representations of food choices, can hinder sustainable behaviors even when individuals hold positive attitudes toward green food. Other perceived reasons for the attitude-behavior gap phenomenon were price and recognizability, well-known green purchase barriers.

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- Perceived behavioral control: when we asked: “Would you be able, if you wanted to, to start buying green food?”, the majority of participants answered “Partially” (38%) or “Yes” (38%). That is in line with recent findings indicating that a significant portion of consumers is aware of green products (Chethan *et al.*, 2024; Puja & Sharma, 2024). The factors that participants reported as obstacles to recognizing green food products were lack of knowledge, lack of time, and lack of attention when shopping, as theorized by the Dual Process Theory (Kahneman, 2011), and high prices, a well-known green consumption barrier. This may suggest that perceived behavioral control is not just an individual trait but is also shaped by systemic barriers, such as common little knowing about eco-labels and high prices.
- Green habits: most participants stated that they usually buy some green food habitually (71%), mainly fruits and vegetables, eggs, dairy and meat. We also asked: “Before you buy food, do you check whether it meets green standards?”. Most of the participants answered “Yes” (71%). These answers indicate that they already had a habit of buying green food, even though they declared that they belonged to the group affected by the intention-behavior gap. This apparent contradiction, where participants report both green habits and a green attitude-behavior gap, can be explained through the lens of social representations. Participants may habitually buy certain green products (e.g., fruits and vegetables) while still perceiving barriers to fully adopting a green diet, reflecting a fragmented social representation of sustainability as “partial” or “not fully achievable”.
- Green food premium price: most participants did not have a strong opinion about green food’s premium price (I don’t know, 48%), while another part believed it was fair (38%), and the remainder thought that it was acceptable only if not too high (14%). The opinions that emerged were that the higher price is justified by better quality, that paying a premium for an eco-sustainable product is unfair, and that the government should compensate for the price difference with eco-incentives. This ambivalence toward the premium price reflects a social representation of green food as both a “luxury” and a “necessity”, where economic and ethical considerations coexist.
- Emotional reactions: the emotions reported after assisting to marketing deception examples were surprise, disappointment, anger, confusion, anxiety, and the feeling of being teased. Moreover, participants reported feeling ignorant for not recognizing the deception, and that after that realization, they felt more skeptical about green product advertising. These emotional reactions reveal a collective suspiciousness toward green marketing. Then we presented them with information about some food production processes, heavily polluting. Most participants (43%)

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did not know that the mentioned foods polluted so much, while some knew it only partially (24%). They expressed their disappointment, though not surprised, stating that this information made them feel guilty, reluctant to consume those foods anymore. They also emphasized that more people should be informed and that awareness campaigns are necessary, highlighting the need to increase public education about the topic.

- Attitudes toward green marketing: participants stated that green advertising was too infrequent (many could not recall an example), that they were skeptical of it, that it was intended for the élite, and that they found it paternalistic. This skepticism aligns with a social representation of green marketing as exclusionary or insincere, which may contribute to the green attitude-behavior gap. Most of the participants stated that they wished for a green advertisement that is recognizable, simple, guaranteed with a certificate, and informative, describing the wish for consumers' empowerment.
- Individual responsibility in eco-sustainability: the majority of participants stated that environmental protection was the government's responsibility. The second most frequent answer was "Multinational firms", followed by "Everyone" and individual consumers. This delegation of responsibility reflects a social representation of sustainability as a systemic issue, where individual actions are seen as insufficient without structural change. This aligns with the community psychology perspective, where collective efficacy is emphasized over individual responsibility.
- Alternative appealing names: many participants stated that the names of traditional dishes could not be changed if the ingredients differed from the original recipe. Other participants thought the vegetarian/vegan designation was the appropriate label, while some preferred a descriptive language that conveys the dish's characteristics rather than labelling it as vegetarian. One 32-year-old male participant said: "In my opinion, they should not use traditional dishes' names, like Lasagna, because people will think it's not good. Unfortunately, there is a lot of stigma on the terms vegan or vegetarian". This ambivalence toward labeling reflects a social representation of plant-based foods as both innovative and stigmatized, where tradition and modernity coexist in tension. This finding is in line with previous research that found that it is possible to significantly increase the tendency of non-vegetarians to eat plant-based food by not labelling it as "vegetarian" (Vennard *et al.*, 2018).

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4. Discussion & Conclusions

The focus groups of this study provided a qualitative understanding of consumers' perceptions and behaviors, and in how social representations and ambivalence shape the green attitude-behavior gap. In addition to merely cataloguing opinions and barriers, our qualitative analysis revealed how participants co-constructed shared meanings of sustainability, negotiating tensions between personal habits and societal expectations (Amir *et al.*, 2024). For example, the ambivalent representation of green food as "expensive but ethical" emerged repeatedly, reflecting both structural barriers (e.g., cost) and moral motivations (e.g., environmental responsibility). In fact, while 95.2% of participants cited "environment protection" as a motive for buying green food, 47.6% also identified "price" as a barrier (Table 2). Moreover, the tension between tradition and innovation emerged as a central social representation, with participants simultaneously framing green food as ethic imperative ("We have to do it for future generations") and a threat to cultural identity ("To ensure the traditionality of a certain product, you must buy certain ingredients rather than others"). These contradictions reveal how social representations of green food as "desirable but inaccessible", a shared meaning co-constructed in the focus groups, shape the green attitude-behavior gap. Moreover, the emotional reactions to greenwashing (e.g., surprise, disappointment, anger) demonstrated how violations of trust in sustainability claims triggered a re-evaluation of shared representations, with participants expressing both skepticism and desire to a systemic change (e.g. wishing that more people would be informed about little-known food production environmental impact facts). This dynamic aligns with Social Representations Theory, where sustainability is not a static attitude but a negotiated meaning within the group (Moscovici, 1984).

Participants shared their opinions, which, in part, reflected well-known barriers and facilitators from the literature and, in part, provided novel insights. Most of the variables that emerged from the answers to the food choice motives questions were consistent with the existing research on green purchase facilitators and barriers. The drivers included in the "Health and environmentalist motives" sub-themes were already associated with higher consumption of organic food products (Marty *et al.*, 2022). Other facilitators recurrent in literature that emerged were the fact that these products are believed to have a better quality that partially justifies the high prices (Muñoz-Martínez *et al.*, 2024), that green self-efficacy (i.e., the belief that the action of an individual can benefit the environment, Bandura, 1977) is positively related to green purchase behavior (Sharma *et al.*, 2023), that the availability of food is an important variable according to

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consumers (Abrahamse, 2020), and that ethical motivations (e.g., animal welfare, local economy support, or future generations' wellbeing) also play a role in green consumerism (Karsaklian & Fee, 2014). Moreover, the fact that many consumers would prefer green food products to be more recognizable through clear, reliable eco-labels is also in line with the extant literature, which stresses the need for fewer, shared, and clearer eco-labels (Potter *et al.*, 2024). One interesting thing to note regarding green self-efficacy is that while participants were aware of the fact that their actions can have a concrete positive impact on the environment and on society at large (as visible in the "Environmentalist and ethical motives" sub-theme), the majority of them stated that environmental protection was governments' and firms' responsibility. From a community psychology perspective, this delegation of responsibility suggests a lack of perceived collective efficacy, leaving the individual feeling isolated and powerless in the face of systemic issues (Bandura, 2000; Gearhart, 2023). This tension between personal agency and structural constraints is a key example of how social representations of sustainability are co-constructed in group discussions, rather than held individually. Future research could examine the discrepancy between consumers' cognitive knowledge and their perceived responsibility.

Regarding green food purchase barriers, our results are consistent with the literature but also offer new insights. Participants reported that higher prices (often higher than those of traditional food) (Fehér *et al.*, 2020) and product appearance (sometimes worse in eco-sustainable food) (Aertsens *et al.*, 2009) were significant barriers to green food purchasing. Moreover, we found that taste preferences can be a significant barrier. This could be especially true for some segments of the population, since people unfamiliar with green foods are more likely to dislike their taste (Boukid, 2021). Finally, two relatively new aspects of the green food literature emerged: defense tradition and culinary innovation. Some participants indicated attachment to traditional food practices as a barrier to consuming green foods. Such practices are, in fact, deeply embedded in cultural identity and heritage, so people may resist altering recipes passed down through generations, even if they are less sustainable (Goel *et al.*, 2023). Psychological barriers, such as nostalgia and the emotional connection to traditional foods, can impede the adoption of new, sustainable dietary practices (Stevens, 2014). However, the opposite trend has also been reported by focus group participants. In fact, consumers who are more open to new experiences tend to favor eco-sustainable food options as they are more likely to appreciate the benefits of environmentally friendly practices (Rabadán & Bernabéu, 2021). Moreover, in a recent paper on cultured food, curiosity was found to influence consumers' willingness to try new products (Arango *et al.*, 2024). These

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opposing attitudes highlight another ambivalence at the heart of the green attitude-behavior gap, where tradition and innovation coexist as competing social representations.

Future research could further delve into these interesting variables, investigating which factors lead people to adopt a defense of tradition or a culinary innovation attitude.

In summary, the picture that emerged from these three focus groups depicts a complex scenario that goes beyond a "pure" attitude-behavior gap, in which consumers wish to buy green food but do not. In fact, our qualitative analysis found that most participants are already accustomed to buying some green food products, but only regarding a part of their grocery shopping. That is due to several reasons, but the principal one was a lack of resources (knowledge, time, attention), as posited by the fast decisional pathways theorized by Danner and Thøgersen (2022) and Kahneman (2011). Another notable attitude that emerged from the discussions is that receiving information about greenwashing and polluting production processes elicited various emotions in participants, which fostered the intention to shift their behavior towards greener choices, but at the same time increased their skepticism and cynicism ("I'm disappointed but not surprised") toward green advertising. These emotional reactions further illustrate the ambivalence in social representations of green food, where trust and doubt coexist. Future research should further deepen these emotional aspects, while keeping consumer experiences in mind to capture the essential meanings co-constructed in communities. Another important point raised by participants was the need for recognizable, simple, and informative food eco-labels, accompanied by awareness campaigns to increase consumers' environmental knowledge. This wish expressed by participants pinpoint the need of collective consumer empowerment actions. Marketers and policymakers should take a leaf out of this suggestion when designing advertising and informative interventions. However, to truly foster empowerment and participation, these interventions should move beyond simple individual incentives. Instead of focusing only on the "lonely consumer", policies should support community-based initiatives, such as Solidarity Purchase Groups (GAS), urban gardens, or local sustainability networks (Dal Gobbo & Forno, 2020). These bottom-up practices can enhance collective efficacy and a sense of responsibility toward the common good, transforming sustainable consumption from an individual burden into a shared social practice (Andrews, 2013). These awareness campaigns could also help shift consumers' perceptions of responsibility for environmental protection toward greater self-efficacy, a fundamental factor supporting green purchasing choices that were scarce among our focus group partici-

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pants. Finally, we analyzed the possible application of alternative appealing names in green food descriptions. Again, ambivalent opinions emerged, with part of the participants finding the use of the terms "vegetarian" and "vegan" a good decision, and the other finding it unsuitable because of tradition defense reasons and preferring a descriptive language. This appealing alternative strategy could be a cheap and effective way to foster green food purchase behavior that marketers should consider, as it may address the ambivalence between tradition and innovation in social representations.

The focus group method is not without limitations. It is inevitable that group dynamics will directly influence the discussion. Conformity or cohesion, in fact, may impede the successful conduct of studies, resulting in distorted results and participants' reactions (Colucci, 2007). Moreover, the presence of a moderator and videotaping in the focus group can influence respondents' behavior, as they may become more cautious, censor their responses, or simply adjust to what they perceive to be the moderator's expectations (Puzanova *et al.*, 2023). Indeed, the latter should maintain a neutral facial expression when conducting the group, which is an extremely challenging task. That is because, according to Ekman *et al.* (1969), mimic reactions appear involuntarily and are virtually uncontrollable. Another important limitation of this study is that the results are based on a completely Italian population sample; therefore, they cannot be generalized to other countries. In fact, each country has its own food culture and consequent consumption habits. It would be interesting for future research to conduct cross-country comparisons. Another limitation of this study is that we did not collect participants' dietary habits (e.g., omnivorous, vegetarian, vegan, or other), although the topic came up in the "Dietary choices" sub-theme. This information could have provided interesting insights into how adhering to different diets would influence opinions on the study's topic. We suggest future qualitative research to deepen this aspect.

The transition from an individualistic to an ecological perspective represents more than a theoretical shift; it is an acknowledgment of the profound interconnectedness of social ties. In this light, sustainable consumption is no longer a solitary exercise in rational choice but a shared narrative in which cultural identity and collective responsibility converge. By promoting dialogue and active participation, communities can transform the environmental challenge into a catalyst for social cohesion, fostering a future in which the health of the individual and the resilience of the planet are pursued as a single, inseparable goal.

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