

# Choosing Local Organic Food: Consumer Motivations and Ethical Spaces

Artur Saraiva, Moritz von Schwedler, Emília Fernandes

**Abstract**—In recent years, the organic sector has increased significantly. However, with the ‘conventionalization’ of these products, it has been questioned whether these products have been losing their original vision. Accordingly, this research based on 31 phenomenological interviews with committed organic consumers in urban and rural areas of Portugal, aims to analyse how ethical motivations and ecological awareness are related to organic food consumption. The content thematic analysis highlights aspects related to society and environmental concerns. On an individual level, the importance of internal coherence, peace of mind and balance that these consumers find in the consumption of local organic products was stressed. For these consumers, local organic products consumption made for significant changes in their lives, aiding in the establishment of a green identity, and involves a certain philosophy of life. This vision of an organic lifestyle is grounded in a political and ecological perspective, beyond the usual organic definition, as a ‘post-organic era’. The paper contributes to better understand how an ideological environmental discourse allows highlighting the relationship between consumers’ environmental concerns and the politics of food, resulting in a possible transition to new sustainable consumption practices.

**Keywords**—Organic consumption, localism, content thematic analysis, pro-environmental discourse, political consumption, Portugal.

## I. INTRODUCTION

IN recent decades the organic food sector has sharply grown, resulting in its values being undermined by market forces [1]. Nowadays, organic conventionalization and the mainstream agro-food sector is more interested in its commercial value than in its original vision [2], [3]. In practical terms, the organic production and distribution system is becoming larger in scale, taking up long distances and sometimes being based on a monoculture industry [4]. Currently, centralized agro-food production and marketing systems are increasing the distance between producers and consumers [5], raising the question of whether these products are truly organic [6].

Some initiatives mentioned in the literature, suggest a ‘post-organic era’ based on local direct marketing and Local Food Networks (LFN) in which the principles and values go beyond the current organic definition [7]. That is, products obtained from methods and materials that enhance the ecological balance, in particular being produced without pesticides, herbicides, or other synthetic products [8]. However, only a few consumers have the ability to pay a premium [9] for organic products and to put into practice their concerns toward

the environment [10]. There are considerable evidences and barriers to express an ecologically oriented consumption [11]. Despite such a decision involving a significant effort in terms of cost and time [12], some consumers are willing to pay more for socially and environmentally conscious products [13].

Current consumption patterns are, from an environmental point of view, unsustainable and need to be changed [14], [15]. Some authors consider that it is urgent to focus on alternative forms of consumption based on a ‘hard sustainability’ approach, in contrast to the rhetoric of a ‘soft view’ of sustainability expressed by environmental economists [8]. In what concerns the relationship between environmental friendly behaviour and attitudes towards the purchase of organic food, there are only few studies that focus on this subject.

The literature suggests that the commonly mentioned reasons for consumers to purchase organic products are the perceived effects of organic products on the environment, sustainability, taste, prestige, support for local farmers, lifestyle, health and nutritional content, quality and product attributes [16]–[18]. Some consumers would prefer organic products based on health criteria because of medical issues; while some others may purchase organic food based on more abstract reasons [17] in a way to support a food system that is more sustainable from an environmental point of view [17].

Despite social barriers, individual dilemmas and sacrifice to express an ecologically oriented consumption, there are still some consumers, who are willing to put their environmental concerns into practice [11]–[13]. It is this core group of consumers, which is investigated in this study. This research focuses on the reasons behind organic products purchasing, their relationship with environmental concerns, and the meaning that these consumer choice represent in their lives. Therefore, a qualitative and phenomenological approach was carried out in order to achieve the following objectives:

- 1) To understand organic consumer motivations and the cultural meanings represented by organic consumption;
- 2) To identify the main barriers in accessing and consuming organic products;
- 3) To identify how environmental concerns and ethical behaviour influence organic consumption.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### A. Organic Food Motivations

Organic and local products have been studied in several countries [19], confirming that beyond demographic variables there are several differences regarding their values and beliefs [20]–[22] suggesting that choosing organic products seems to

Artur Saraiva is with the University of Minho, School of Economics and Management, Portugal (e-mail: artur.saraiva@academiamilitar.pt).

be an entirely rational decision [23], [6]. From a marketing point of view, the term 'organic' and what these products represent, suggests a symbolic and intangible dimension [17]. The organic food motivations can be classified under two main categories: health and environmental motivations. The first relates to the egoistic dimension, benefiting the individual himself or his family; while the second implies a more altruistic consideration, benefiting society concerns rather than the individual's [24].

Previous research has shown that health reasons are one of the main reasons to purchase organic food [6], [17], [19], [21], [25], [26], demonstrating that egoistic and hedonistic motives make for a better predictor than altruistic motives and environmental consciousness [24], [27]. On the other hand, an individual decision consumption choice can also express an ethical value by choosing organic food [28] taking into account the political, economic, social and environmental effects [29].

The 'environmental ethic' [15] is another frequent reason for purchasing organic products and appeared to be as equally important as health motives [24]. However, the consumer behaviours related with environmental considerations is much more abstract than health reasons [17]. As [30] asserts, motivational domains such as universalism, benevolence/welfare, and spirituality/meaning in life are positively associated with environmental attitudes because they reflect collectivistic concerns rather than individualistic interests. Such aspects are focused on the enhancement of others, the transcendence of selfish interests, and endowing life with meaning. In addition, it may be referred that altruism, which is associated with these three motivational goals, would influence other ecological behaviours such as, for example, recycling [30]. In the same vein, it has been found that environmental concerns demonstrate a deep reflection about society and of how a responsible consumer must act. Moreover, regarding the influence that social and environmental concerns have on consumer decision-making, studies have shown that consumers are willing to pay a higher price for these green products, suggesting a potential marketplace [13]. Besides, consumers demonstrate preference for companies that express concerns for social responsibility, pay fair salaries to local workers, and support the local community [13]. Under these circumstances, knowledge regarding agriculture practices in protecting the environment and supporting the local economy seems to be relevant to obtain a sustainable competitive advantage in the marketplace [13].

The environment argument is associated with environmentally friendly agriculture, a 'production technique', more concurrent with the environment and local ecosystems [15]. From the production perspective, some farmers are opting for an organic solution as a way to ensure better sustainability regarding the conventional sector and price reduction [15]. Also, organic consumption means an opposition to the conventional farming system, associated with pollution and degradation [25], in the way such products are valued because of their naturalness, authenticity and small-

scale production [3], contributing to a sustainable agriculture practice and a healthy environment [25]. From a more extreme position, organic farming can also mean a livelihoods perspective related to a political ecology and farming activism [7].

Another expression of environmental ethics is 'ecological citizenship' [15]. The concept is based on the argument that by adopting an ecological citizenship guided by social and environmental concerns rather than finance pressures, it will be possible to minimize the ecological footprint. Therefore, ecological citizenship could be a driving force to achieve the sustainable consumption by purchasing local organic food. Moreover, it is also emphasized the importance of LFN in promoting ecological citizenship.

The literature has shown that consumers are also concerned about reducing 'food miles' [21], that is, the distance food travels between the place where it is produced and where it is consumed [15], avoiding pollution in transportation and cutting the environmental impact around the world. This means that the products should be consumed quite near to the point where they are produced [8]. Consequently, this point leads us to another concept – 'localism'. Recently, there is a new association between organic food and locally produced food [21]. Local food production refers to food that is "produced, retailed and consumed in a specific area" [31, p. 565], representing concerns and support by rural policy objectives such as local employment, regional economies, cultural heritage, small-scale and artisan production. Localism is also associated with the concept of Community Support Agriculture (CSA), as a mechanism for community-building [15], where "the money goes to the farmers" [31, p. 566]. In this way, this perspective focuses attention on social issues and the problems of small producers [31], putting in practice social cohesion, expressing egalitarians and alternative values about society and the environment, rather than economic priorities [14], [15].

Localism can also be understood from a political perspective, in the sense that it can express an alternative, in order to reduce further social and environmental borders [2]. Therefore, local food consumption can also mean a counter-cultural movement [14].

To sum up, organic and local consumption is an essential condition for "maintaining human and environmental health and security, globally" [4, p. 125]; as a mechanism for community building, establishing trust, developing personal relationships [20]; and linking ecological citizenship with strong environmental ethic motivation [15].

### III. METHODOLOGY

In this research, a qualitative and existential phenomenological approach was used to get a more in-depth knowledge of this research topic, in order to explore the meanings behind consumer decision, and emphasizing the individual lived experience through each narrative [32]–[38]. This study follows this new epistemological perspective by focusing on the consumption experiences of each individual, by the use of in-depth inquiry and hermeneutic endeavour

analysis [36].

In this research, it was a requirement that each participant saw himself as a frequent organic products consumer [21], highly committed, and identified with their environmental-related consumption choices [39]. Participants were recruited through a process of purposive sampling [40]–[49], in contexts such as environmental groups, eco-shops, eco-communards and eco-farms [48], [50]. The sample included 31 in-depth interviews conducted over a period of eight months. The recruitment strategy allowed to consider a mix of gender and age, socio-economic groups, and geographic differences such rural and urban areas.

Due to the nature of the phenomenological approach, the format of the interview raises some ethical issues related to prior consent, its recording, and confidentiality [37]. The anonymity was guaranteed and all the interviewees' names used are pseudonymous to protect the identity of each participant [51]. As the objective is to discuss the experience in the first person, the interviews had a conversational nature

(emergent dialog) [33], [37], [42], [51]. According to other studies [42], [47], the interview started with an abstract question (general question) encouraging the interviewee to talk about the evolution of their habits of consumption of organic products and their experiences [40]. At the same time, the interview was directed so that informants feel encouraged to share their experiences and their life stories [33].

Each interview took about one hour and was recorded. This procedure was followed by a verbatim transcription, and the field notes were also considered in the analysis. A content thematic analysis was followed to analyze the collected qualitative data.

#### IV. RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The nature of this research is exploratory and the essential subjects extracted from the data analysis are represented in the following conceptual model, which will be detailed below.

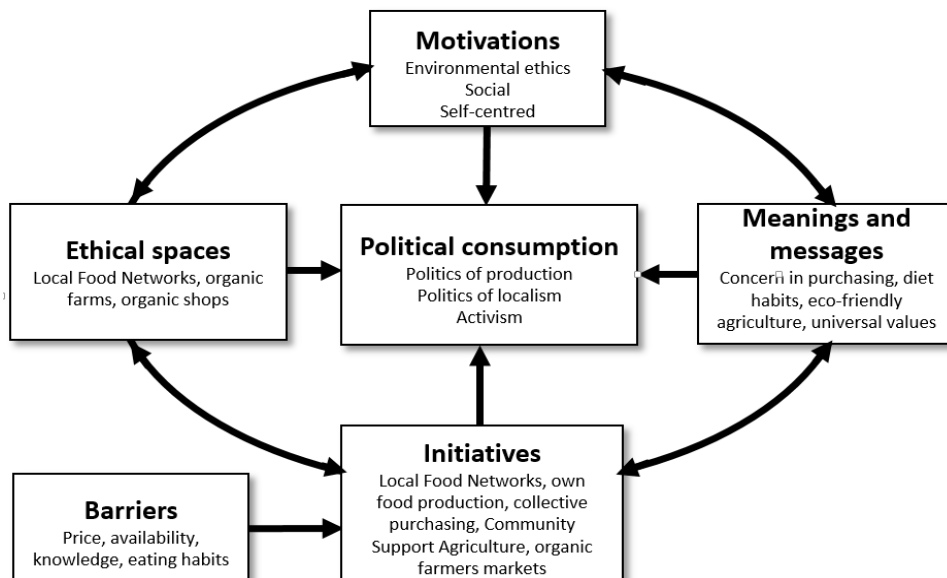


Fig. 1 Organic consumers' conceptual model

##### A. Organic Consumer Motivations

In this research, consumers' motivations have been gathered in three main categories: environmental, social and self-centred interests. However, the most relevant aspect is related to environmental concerns. Organic consumption was a consequence of a critical and reflective process. Several participants stated that their environmental concerns already existed long before their preference for organic products. This is supported by the belief of the immediate impact of agriculture on the environment.

To these participants, environmental criteria are positioned in a priority level that is higher to any other else, particularly the health ones. This motivates them to produce their own food and to buy only if there is no other possibility at all. Even the fact of choosing to buy organic products follows very

restrictive criterion, as shown in the following extract.

These are not health questions! Of course one must have health concerns when consuming a product that is industrially produced with many chemicals! But that is not my greatest concern... It is the impact that my consumption leaves on the soil, in the air, the carbon emissions, large scale agriculture productions, the dehumanization, because the large companies make everything, starting with the almost slavery of people that work there. That is my great motivation for consuming local organic and producing as much as possible. (Mariana)

Also related to environmental concerns, is the emphasis of eco-friendly agriculture. Consumers share the criticism to conventional agriculture, considering it responsible for great

part of pollution and for the destruction of natural ecosystems. João, who practices a biodynamic agriculture, distances himself from conventional agriculture. The text below evidences his argument.

Well, what I think is that there is an agriculture that produces products that are against life. Industrial agriculture produces dead products... And the organic agriculture system stresses the living forces, without antibiotics or pressures, and everything is focused to support life. For me, this is very important and I want to support this type of agriculture. I consider this agriculture as belonging to this century and conventional agriculture as belonging to the last century. This is the future... (João)

Some of these consumers attribute a high level of trust to producers who practice an artisanal, home and local agriculture "to maintaining nature as it is" and "eating what is around nature". They also consider artisanal and home agriculture the "most organic". Consumers try to produce these products themselves. To them, the organic product concept must be based on agro-ecology. The text below shows how the environmental and social justice arguments are associated with agro-ecology.

For me, it is still a philosophy and I am very careful when I talk about organic in specifying what type of organic I am referring to. Because there is not only one organic but several! Mine is the initial one, the one that has to do with social and environmental justice, to keep the scale small, "small is beautiful"... So, it is not only related to eliminating pesticides and synthetic fertilizers. It is has to do with an agro-ecologic approach... I may say that my vision of organic is agro-ecology. (Mara)

Participants seemed to prefer products produced and consumed locally, with the objective of reducing the impact of the transport of products in the environment (food miles). Jorge, a CSA local promoter, stresses out the relation of local products with environmental concerns.

For me, the first motivation is environmental concern and respect for the Earth. Of course, health is part of this, but I do not consider only the question of personal health. This is why I do not like to buy organic products that come from the other side of the Earth, because this does not respect the environment. Even if I see that the products are good! So, I insist on buying organic products that are local, that are produced nearby and respect the environment. (Jorge)

These consumers show a high level of environmental concerns and an awareness that, when consuming organic products, they are supporting several environmentally friendly agricultural techniques. These results are consistent with other studies [21], [23]–[26], [8], in which the ecological values have a positive influence in relation to purchasing organic products. Nevertheless, to a small number of consumers, the health and nutritional benefits provided by organic products are the main reason for consumption. However, the results of this research contradict the assumption of [24] that health concerns (related to egoistic motives) can be a better predictor

for choosing organic products than concerns for the environment.

It was also found that these participants prefer to support environmentally friendly agriculture (traditional agriculture, biodynamic agriculture, agro-ecology, agro-forestry) and to distance themselves from these organic products that came from organic farming "conventionalisation" [52].

Participants pointed out that their preference for local organic products is also motivated by social and economic reasons. However, environmental concern cannot be separated from social awareness because consumers expressed interest in knowing "the story behind the product". Therefore, the preference for local products is also related to the intention of supporting economically the local community, particularly farmers that produce organically – CSA. This means that the option to produce organically and locally has an ecological basis but also a human and social dimension.

When I found out the CSA system, I found something that fits perfectly to what I think: it is essential to recreate localism and solidarity partnership between consumer and producer. Obviously, these solidarity partnerships cannot only be made at the local level, they can be done at distance, but it is more complicated. It is much easier at local level. For this reason and for environmental and social reasons, I think that we should give absolute priority to local products. (Jorge)

What the literature seems to suggest is that there is an attempt to differentiate what is organic and local [20]. However, as the results of this research also suggest, consumers who are concerned to give importance to buying organic products, tend to buy also locally as well because of the trust established with the producer or seller, giving less importance to certified organic products [19]. In that sense, organic products and local food purchasing are currently not considered mainstream [31].

The results of this research demonstrate that these participants assume a strong political positioning: they are very active and aware of their role as consumers, recognizing the consumption of organic products as a resilience act towards the corporations that dominate the agricultural and industrial systems. They therefore want to preserve the environment through organic consumption, by influencing food habits of other people. With this motivation, they aim at a greater autonomy and sovereignty towards food. With this result, it is possible to associate these consumers to an ecological citizenship [15]: the ecological citizenship is a driven force for alternative sustainable consumption through the consumption of organic products. Furthermore, the concept of 'reflexive localism' [7], [53] is reinforced, considering the local, social and political relations of power.

Participants stressed the option of being vegetarian by reasons of animal well-being. One may therefore conclude that people who identify themselves as 'green consumers' will more likely purchase organic food [54]. These consumers prefer to consume organic products near the location of their production. As [40, p. 277] referred, "sustainable production and consumption are essentially two sides of the same coin".

This is not merely the result of environmental concerns, but also stems from the desire to support farmers, who use these environmental friendly techniques, and therefore, contribute to the development of the local economy. To most organic products consumers, the choice is predominantly based on environmental and social considerations. This support promotes new commercial relations based on trust and closeness. Therefore, what underlies these consumer practices is not only a new relationship with the environment but also the defence of a new way of thinking about the economy.

Another interesting aspect identified in the interviews was the connection between organic products and life enjoyment. Participants pointed out that they value the simplicity of food, which means that food should be as simple and fresh as possible. For other participants, eating organically makes them stand out from the natural and sensory aspects of food and the emotional experiences [4], [23], [27], [31]. They describe the moments in which they consume organic food as family and pleasure moments, appreciating the freshness of the products, the nostalgia and the memories that they bring them. In these cases, organic products operated as a facilitator to transform consumers' lives and contribute to the formation of a new identity [40]. One result of this research that stands out is the existence of altruistic considerations rather than personal interests, confirming the results in which health motivations are losing importance [6], [24], [25], [8], [55].

#### *B. Obstacles, Alternatives and Initiatives*

In this research, two categories of constraints to organic consumption are identified: (1) market constraints, such as price and local availability; and (2) social constraints, related to food habits (vegetarianism).

Most participants recognized that organic products are more expensive than their conventional counterparts are. They admit that they have to make a financial sacrifice and, in some cases, this is a constraint to having an entirely organic diet. However, this sacrifice is overcome because of a moral reward provided by organic consumption as well as by the fact of believing that they are having a positive social and environmental behaviour and are doing the right thing. Owing to the cost factor, some consumers need to be more organized and reasonable when planning their purchases, or consider the possibility of producing more themselves.

Throughout the interviews, it was clear that these individuals, when deciding to purchase a more expensive organic product, are thinking that their act may contribute to support a more traditional type of agriculture that is ultimately more environmentally friendly because of a more rigorous production process. They value this work and are willing to help producers to have better life conditions.

There is a very important aspect. As a consumer, I am aware that I have to pay more... But I think that the cost difference is not too significant [considering the technical specification of organic and conventional products]. The cost difference is justified by the appreciation that I, as a consumer, have for those who work with organic products and for my wish that they receive a fair payment

and that they provide fair conditions to those who work with them. And for this, it is necessary to pay more! (Marco)

These organic products consumers recognize the difficulty of being a consumer of this type of products within the Portuguese context, owing to the high prices and the limited number of suppliers where these items can be bought, particularly in rural areas. These barriers are consistent with existing research [15], [21], [24], [56], [57], in which price is identified as being a significant barrier. However, also referred to in this research, but not mentioned in the literature, are the social and internal barriers that these consumers have to deal with in the Portuguese context. However, they continue purchasing or decide to produce organic products to reach their social and environmental goals [13], being their actions consistent with their discourse. In fact, consumption constraints such as price, locations and availability do not prevent organic product consumption. On the contrary, participants are encouraged to find alternatives (collectively or individually), such as local exchange spots and own food production. Monica's example is significant. As an urban consumer, she experiences the financial effort of consuming organic products firsthand, and therefore, looks for alternatives (promoting exchange networks, associating for the maintenance of localism and local social currency) to get products at more affordable prices.

It depends [the effort of buying organic owing to the prices]. My professional life is not very stable and last year I had less work and less income. So, I was not willing to spend more. I do not give up. If I need something but I cannot afford it, I feel I can create conditions to have access to these products or produce my own products so that I can take part in the exchange network. But in general I do not regret spending a little more money in the products since I know their quality is completely different, the taste is different... (Monica)

This perspective of producing, trading and consuming locally is in line with the "localism" approach [58], which includes a community ethics, where consumers express concern about the environment, agricultural and food sustainability. This alternative model of consumption acts as a mechanism for cohesion and community construction, bringing sustainability to rural families and enabling the expression of values regarding society, environment and economy [15]. Therefore, the option of preferring organic local products constitutes an opportunity of ownership and power decentralization [4], expressing a support to localist politics and consumption resistance, that are drawn on trust and ecological awareness [15], [21], [59].

#### *C. The Ethical Spaces*

In this research, consumers were also questioned about the places where they usually purchase their organic products. Reference [60] defines these sites as 'ethical spaces', as contexts that guide individual members to more consistent and greener behaviours, facilitating environmentally friendlier modes of consumption. These spaces emphasize the

importance of the group and the community through the relations of production and consumption.

In the interviews, several 'ethical spaces' were mentioned in which these participants try to establish who the producer is in order to have a certain connection with the origin of the product. Consumers go to these spaces to get organic products, but not in an exclusive way, since in many places of the country the access to organic products still has constraints. Therefore, besides the existence of a majority that cultivates their own products or purchase them in organic stores, this group of consumers try to attend community gardens, CSA groups, local farmers (box schemes), local organic food network, and in some cases, harvesting directly from nature.

Participants were also asked, if they usually buy organic products in large supermarkets. None of them referred to this as their preferred option. In fact, some of them admitted going to large supermarkets, albeit not very frequently. They refer to organic products sold in these spaces as inferior and that they are "in a corner, yellow and rotten".

Another point of view concerning large supermarkets is what they represent. In general, the perception is negative. Some still have to go to supermarkets since they are not as self-sufficient as they need to be. Others, however, do not even consider this option. To this strict consumer of organic products, large supermarkets have a strong political connotation, since they are a symbol of an economic monopoly. In Sofia's case, although she buys some organic products in medium size supermarkets, she admits that she does not identify with those spaces or with what they represent. Sofia's quote shows how she feels: she does not identify herself with the "encouragement to consumption" and how "they deal with producers".

Why won't I go to large supermarkets? Because I do not like the environment, the noise, all those people, the colours... That consumes all my energy. I do not have patience and I do not like that kind of transaction. Of course I also go to supermarkets. I do not want to fool anybody. I go to Pingo Doce and I buy many products there. (...) For example, milk, organic milk, I buy it there. And yet I do not relate with large supermarkets. I do not like the space, I do not like the stimulation, I do not like the confusion caused by the huge amount of stuff and I do not like the way they function. Even the way they deal with producers, how they make pressure, payment terms... They like to 'crush' the supplier and I do not like that. (Sofia)

Conversely, the space with greater significance is related to the place where they grow their own food. This practice was mentioned as one of the most reactive and it is motivated by several reasons: the willingness to be self-sufficient in terms of food; the need to reach a certain level of independence in relation to the usual market channels; the adoption of agricultural techniques that do not damage the environment (environmentalism in agriculture); and naturally, the limited choice of organic products in Portugal. Furthermore, some consumers are aware that many organic products that are sold in supermarket chains do not satisfy the requirements in terms

of quality, price and ethics. However, they do not feel represented by those large surfaces, not only for these kinds of products but for general consumption. This fact is often mentioned in literature. For example, [31] refer that Finish consumers are tired of the organic choices available in supermarkets; [61] point out that Canadian consumers prefer to buy in local businesses than regular supermarkets; or [21], also in the Canadian context, referring to the lack of information about the products or the over-packaging. The discourse of these consumers includes a very strong political connotation, expressed by the opposition to the capitalist system, for its lack of ethics, labour conditions and producer exploration. This behaviour is consistent with [62, p. 68] statement: "shopping in a supermarket is a breach of green cultural codes", passing the thought that consumers of this sample do not relate with the more commercial models of organic products transaction and that they are willing to find other options. For most of these consumers, buying in large supermarkets is not a consideration.

#### *D. Meanings and Messages*

Constraints present in the Portuguese context reinforce the convictions of these consumers. A consequence stated by organic product consumers was the adoption of a simpler and more natural lifestyle. Some of the participants reported a significant reduction of conventional products consumption, the adoption of healthy habits, being in touch with nature, home cooked meals and dedicating more time to oneself. Since they feel good consuming local organic products and believe that this is the right way, these consumers try to spread this feeling to their friends and encourage them to go to the same exchange locations. This reinforces the conviction to continue consuming organically, despite social pressure. Furthermore, in their narratives, these participants demonstrate a strong belief in local organic products and what they mean to them. Some have chosen to move from the city to the countryside to follow their projects, talk about their difficulties, financial effort, and social and family pressure. However, they reportedly feel happy with the lifestyle they adopted. Organic products are an important element in their lives, contributing to personal balance and identity formation. As one participant referred, organic food "is a bridge to other things".

An aspect frequently stated by participants was the great concern in choosing organic and influencing others. Participants consider it very important to control the food source, purchasing "less manipulated, pure, simple products". Also, the importance of organic products in their lives was often highlighted. Some consumers admitted "being increasingly willing to consume organically". Others referred to the fact that they invest a significant part of their time looking for options (places and products) or dynamising the exchange network to which they belong.

It was also expressed that organic consumption works was a way to influence other consumers drawing their attention to environmental problems or other production alternatives. For example, consuming organic products and supporting local

organic agriculture. João ironically talks about “recruiting” his neighbour, Mr. Manuel ‘Monsanto’, referring to the chemical products company, to be aware of the impact that agricultural techniques have on the environment. In most cases, this influence is ‘soft’, not defying those who are not organic consumers.

Being a consumer of organic products is necessarily related with food habits. As Rosa states, “food is not a neutral thing. It is very intimate!” An often expressed aspect in the interviews was vegetarianism and the reason behind this choice. Concerning a vegetarian lifestyle, generally the process is very personal and gradual, related to an increase of environmental awareness, in an attempt to be coherent with these principles. In some cases, a vegetarian diet had already been adopted before starting to consume organic products. However, even those who are not strictly vegetarian referred to the willingness of adopting this diet, the moral dilemma of consuming meat, the need of reducing its consumption, and the conflicts with family and friends.

Like vegetarianism, organic consumption is focused on the person, in a perspective of spiritual well-being. In Maria’s case, this awareness was an emotional and personal process, as a dialogue close to the earth, “literally digging” and learning from the earth.

The consumption of organic products encourages other healthy practices that made them feel good. Organic consumption stands for healthy food and lifestyle, environment preservation and emotional balance. In a perspective of well-being and life philosophy, some components like the connection with nature are more salient. Like the other participants, Marco considers food a main aspect in his life. Below, he explains the importance of food in his life and his connection to nature.

It is philosophical [his relation with food]. Rather than material! Although I am one of those people who believe that material component is intimately connected to the spiritual component. So, nowadays if people ask for a coffee... if they purchase here or there... organic or not organic... They are giving their contribution to the eco-system. Are they cooperating with the eco-system or eliminating them? It is an action of rough power if considered in this perspective. Many people think: “only farmers have positive or negative impact on nature”. No! Our relation with nature is mandatory, daily; it is for everybody and comes from food. Mainly from food; and, food is mainly the connecting link. (Marco)

In this sense, participants consider organic consumption as a ‘life philosophy’ that cannot be separated from environmental concerns. Their daily relationship with food makes them feel closer to their “life project”.

Several participants posed the questioned of was referred to? The guaranteed one or not guaranteed?” The fact of not including synthesis products is not sufficient. The preference was clearly towards the products produced according to non-intensive criteria and consumed in the region of production. The understanding of the organic product goes far beyond the usual definition [7]. Thus, the narratives show aspects not only

related to self-centred values, but mainly concerns for society and nature. In individual terms, it was stressed the importance of internal coherence, peace of mind and balance that these consumers find in the consumption of organic products. The benefits of organic products, their authenticity (the fact of not being refined, of having different production techniques, not being genetically manipulated and not having chemical products), were considered essential criteria for the decision-making process. Consumers of local organic products focus their discourse on the area of values and environmental concern. In fact, these two aspects have an immense importance in their lives and they are not willing to sacrifice them. At most, they would be willing to become more flexible. For these consumers, local organic products consumption made significant changes in their lives, not merely in terms of consumption but also of lifestyle and the way of seeing society. That is to say, local organic products consumption contributed to the construction of a consumption identity, a ‘reflexive self’ [41]. Overall, these participants consider that the consumption of organic products involves a ‘life philosophy’. This vision of organic is consistent with the idea that there is a currently decrease of the ‘conventional’ organic product concept and there is a ‘post-organic era’ grounded in a political and ecological [7], [9].

#### V. FINAL REMARKS

This paper analyzed themes that are still largely neglected in by literature on consumer behaviour. It critically examines organic consumers’ motivations, the barriers they face, and the meanings they attribute to this type of ethical consumption.

As the main motivations to consuming local organic products, environmental concerns are the most important factor, as well as animal well-being, which influences food consumption habits. From an individual perspective of consumption, organic products are considered important to contribute to personal well-being, a lifestyle, not being stressed about their relevance for health questions. Therefore, the importance of food contributes to achieving environmental objectives and represents a means to achieving political objectives, in particular, opposing the capitalist and shifting to the market system. Like other studies, market obstacles such as price, availability of places and products, have been identified. However, social obstacles appeared to be important factors owing to Portuguese food traditions, causing moral dilemmas and making it difficult to express new green consumer identities [33], [46]. As an immediate consequence of these barriers and considering the mentioned motivations, the majority of these participants cultivate their own food, and practice several agricultural options of low environmental impact (agro-ecology, biodynamic, artisanal agriculture). This option also has a political purpose of expressing their ecological convictions, of increasing food self-sufficiency and independence from large supermarkets. This research also evidences the permanent tension with large supermarkets for being responsible for many of the environmental imbalances and social injustices. Therefore, these consumers punish those corporations by boycotting their products, even the organic

products that they sell.

The argument for organic consumption also includes a political motivation. Participants even show militancy and activism when promoting organic products and their agricultural techniques within their cycle of influence, in order to reach sustainability and environmental preservation. These consumers have the precise notion of the importance of consumption, particularly organic products. They attribute a meaning to organic products beyond their usual definition. Besides the usual conditions regarding the absence of synthesis products, they include a strong ethical, environmental and social component. Therefore, the main contribution of this research was to identify a political consumption discourse. Therefore, the context of local organic food consumption acts as an ethical space and organic products represent a symbolic resource in the way they are produced and by who consumes them. It represents an attitude to make environmental convictions prevail, to change their own consumption in general, to oppose the dominance of the mainstream agro-food system. Consequently, three political expressions of green consumption emerged and converge for a hard ecocentric discourse [7], [9], [53], [58], [63]–[65]:

### 1) Politics of Production

The motivation for local artisanal organic food consumption is manifested by a very hard discourse based on two main arguments: the preservation of the environment, supporting an agriculture whose techniques contribute to this purpose; and the desire for self-sufficiency by producing their own food. In practical terms, consumers consider agro-ecology and artisanal agriculture the only way to clean production and to solve environmental problems.

### 2) Politics of Localism

By supporting the local economy, they support, in particular, small producers of organic products, whose farming techniques meet the ethical and environmental requirements (solidarity agriculture). In this context, localism is represented fundamentally by the establishment of exchange networks of organic products. LFN, Alternative Agro-food Networks, Short Supply Chains, and Community Support Agriculture, are some of the initiatives that are at the basis of localism. In these close relationships, consumers favour a direct exchange, such as local bartering, and the use of social and local currencies, although still in a very early state.

### 3) Activism

The politics of production and the politics of localism are a tool of resistance and concern for the asymmetries of power between small farmers and the agro-food system. When one begins to produce and consume organic products that come from this type of agriculture, it becomes a way of beginning to change the entire agro-food complex, as well as a change of paradigm. Another way to resist the established system is to reduce the level of consumption in general.

From a market point of view, organic food could be seen as a new opportunity to identify new markets, more than the general sense of health engagement, reflecting consumers'

values [17], [66]. In terms of the mainstream food business, it is a mistake to ignore the influence and power of this group of consumers. It was clear, according to market perspective, that organic consumers may have great influence on the consumption practices of people within their circle of acquaintances. Ecologically responsible consumers, mainly organic products consumers, are a growing segment that cannot be ignored.

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