

Article

Food-Related Values and Consumption Barriers in Alternative Food Networks in Central-Western Tuscany and the Region of Madrid

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Abstract

There is increasing interest in the role of Alternative Food Networks (AFNs) as spaces in which food consumption is shaped not only by economic factors, but also by social, environmental, and territorial ones. The present study explores how territorial context can be associated with variations in food-related values and perceived barriers among consumers participating in AFNs in two areas: the Florence–Prato–Pisa polycentric metropolitan system (central-western Tuscany, Italy) and the Region of Madrid (Spain). Data were collected through a structured questionnaire administered to consumers participating in farmers' markets and consumer groups, and value prioritization was analysed using the Best–Worst Scaling method, complemented by regression analysis. Results reveal systematic differences in value hierarchies between the two territories, alongside some common patterns. Health-related concerns are among the top priorities in both contexts. However, consumers in central-western Tuscany give greater importance to localness, while those in Madrid prioritize environmental sustainability and social justice and economic equity. Similar structural barriers nonetheless emerge in both, in particular higher prices and limited product variety at the sales point. These differences persist after controlling for demographic composition, suggesting that territorial context matters for how food-related values are prioritized by AFN consumers.

Keywords: alternative food networks; consumption barriers; food-related values; local food; sustainable consumption

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1. Introduction

In recent decades, processes of industrialization, globalization, and financialization of the agri-food system have increasingly given rise to a disconnection between food and its territorial, ecological, cultural, and social dimensions [1–3]. Consequently, a wide range of Alternative Food Networks (AFNs) has emerged and can be seen in diverse or-

ganizational forms such as consumer cooperatives, consumer purchasing groups (hereafter referred to as “consumer groups”), and farmers’ markets; these AFNs attempt to re-establish links between producers and consumers, strengthen local economies, and promote more responsible forms of food provisioning and consumption [2–4].

Consumption within AFNs has the potential to reach beyond a purely economic act, and to function as a social practice through which individuals express and negotiate values associated with the ethical, social, sensory, health, and economic dimensions [5–7]. Understanding the values guiding consumers’ purchasing decisions, as well as their forms of engagement within these networks, is therefore essential in order to assess how alternative food initiatives operate in practice. Within these initiatives, food products are often differentiated by their specific attributes such as geographical origin, production methods, ethical attributes, and territorial embeddedness. These differentiated attributes, frequently associated with claims of sustainability, provide a material basis through which consumer values are expressed and negotiated.

In studies examining consumers engaged in sustainability-oriented food practices, territorial context takes on particular importance, since values associated with food consumption may well be linked to the socio-territorial trajectories along which AFNs develop [8]. Herein, socio-territorial trajectories refer to the specific historical, cultural, and institutional pathways through which AFNs have become shaped in each territory [2,9,10]. These trajectories affect not only food practices but also people’s perceptions of sustainable or ethical consumption, insofar as values are not merely individual ideals but are also socially constructed through practice within specific contexts [11–13]. This is supported by previous research: comparative work on alternative food initiatives across contexts documents different interpretations of sustainability-related values [14], while comparative Best–Worst Scaling studies have shown that food value hierarchies vary across countries and consumer contexts [6,15], building on the food values approach originally developed by Lusk and Briggeman (2009) [16]. Comparison of AFN participation across distinct contexts can therefore provide insights into how local dynamics relate to the construction and prioritization of values associated with differentiated food quality and sustainable consumption.

Previous studies have examined food-related values, participation in alternative food initiatives, as well as motivations for sustainable consumption [5,6,17]; however, these values have often been analysed separately or within single contexts. A research gap therefore remains: little comparative empirical evidence is available that simultaneously considers value prioritization, perceived barriers, and territorial context among consumers in AFNs, particularly in cross-territorial comparisons grounded in specific local contexts. This gap highlights the need for comparative approaches that integrate these dimensions in order to better understand how locally embedded conditions may relate to variations in consumer value configurations.

Based upon these considerations, the aim of the present research is to analyse and compare food values guiding sustainable consumption among consumers participating in AFNs within two contexts presenting different socio-territorial trajectories: the Florence–Prato–Pisa polycentric metropolitan system (central-western Tuscany, Italy) and the Region of Madrid (Spain). Specifically, it seeks to identify and rank the values guiding purchasing decisions and to analyse the main perceived barriers preventing access to AFNs in each territory. It also examines how territorial context may relate to the configuration of these values and barriers, providing a comparative exploratory approach that can serve as a basis for future research on sustainable consumption within territorially embedded AFNs. In doing so, the study contributes comparative consumer-side evidence to debates on the territorial differentiation of AFNs, and illustrates the analytical potential of combining Best–Worst Scaling with a territorially grounded comparative design.

This exploratory comparative study is guided by the analytical premise that territorial differences might be associated with variation in how food-related values are interpreted and prioritized within AFNs. In an attempt to address these objectives, a structured survey was conducted with consumers from both territories, all of whom were regular clients or members of consumer groups and/or farmers' markets.

2. Conceptual Background

2.1. Alternative Food Networks and Territories

Alternative Food Networks (AFNs) comprise diverse socio-technical initiatives intended to reconfigure food production, distribution, and consumption in order to promote environmental sustainability, social justice and inclusion, fairness, and territorial proximity [2]. AFNs have emerged in response to structural tensions within the predominant agri-food systems; they seek to reconnect production and consumption and foster innovation and systemic change [14], promote sustainable practices [18], enhance food-system resilience [19], and contribute to public food policies [20]. These networks are highly diverse in organizational forms, actors' motivations, degrees of alternativity, relationships with the predominant agri-food structures, and territorial embeddedness [21,22]. This diversity is closely related to the bottom-up nature of these initiatives and the distinct historical and socioeconomic trajectories of the contexts in which they emerge.

The territory where AFNs operate is not merely a physical location; it also involves socioeconomic, cultural, and political dimensions that shape organizational forms, objectives, and relationships among actors [9,23]. The concept of territorial anchoring describes how production, distribution, and consumption are rooted in specific local contexts, generating differentiated organizational configurations according to agricultural history, production structures, and socio-political dynamics [2,8,10]. Territorial context may therefore be understood as a structuring condition shaping production–consumption relationships, and influencing not only production practices and supply initiatives but also consumption patterns, distribution channels, and the value orientations of the stakeholders in these networks [2].

In the literature on AFNs, the notion of “quality turn” has been used to describe a shift toward renewed attention to food attributes such as origin, production methods, and embeddedness within specific local contexts [24]. Rather than referring to a specific or intrinsic property that enables products to be objectively classified as better or worse, quality can be understood as a relational and multi-attribute construct shaped by the characteristics that the actors choose to prioritize. These attributes may include sensory properties, origin, production methods, environmental performance, or social conditions existing along the supply chain. Critical discussions of the quality turn emphasize that the meanings of quality are contingent and dynamic, shaped by particular institutional, cultural, and economic settings, rather than constituting a uniformly transformative shift. Appeals to embeddedness and locality should therefore not be assumed to automatically imply more equitable or transformative food relations, as constructions of quality may also be shaped by market logics, power asymmetries, and institutional constraints [25,26].

From this perspective, distinct combinations of quality attributes may emerge in different territorial production systems, and these may even coexist within the same territory, depending upon the values and perceptions of the stakeholders involved in the exchange. In order to distinguish between different territorial approaches to food system organization, some authors have proposed the conceptual distinction between Local Agro-Food Systems (LAFSs) and Local Agroecological Food Systems (LAEFSs) [8,27]. LAFSs have been defined as territorial concentrations of firms and institutions linked to food production and commercialization grounded in local identity, where organizational proximity and collective action facilitate differentiation in specific markets [8]. LAEFSs, in

contrast, emphasize agroecological principles such as productive diversification, participatory governance, and the deceleration of the socio-ecological metabolism of food systems, particularly through less dependence on external inputs and resource-intensive supply chains [27].

This distinction may be interpreted as analytical ideal types that foreground different approaches to quality. However, these configurations should not be understood as mutually exclusive or empirically pure models: hybridization across organizational logics and quality approaches is common within AFNs, reflecting the contextual variability and internal diversity of these networks.

Although this distinction has been characterized primarily through production-side and organizational features, the quality approaches that each configuration foregrounds may also be expected to find expression on the demand side, in the attributes that consumers recognize and prioritize when engaging with these networks. Insofar as consumers participate in AFNs whose organizational logics emphasize either identity-based differentiation or agroecological transformation, their value orientations may reflect, and in turn reinforce, the quality approaches prevailing in each configuration. Examining value prioritization among AFN consumers can therefore provide a complementary demand-side perspective on these analytical categories, which have so far received limited empirical attention from the consumer standpoint.

2.2. Food-Related Values and Consumer Prioritization

Kluckhohn (1951) [28] conceptualizes values as “... a conception, explicit or implicit, distinctive of an individual or characteristic of a group, of the desirable which influences the selection from available modes, means, and ends of action” (p. 395). In terms of their function within the human value system, Schwartz (1994) [29] defines values as “desirable trans-situational goals, varying in degrees of importance, that serve as guiding principles in the life of a person or other entity” (p. 21). In this regard, Lusk and Briggeman (2009) [16] empirically demonstrated that values are significantly related to consumer preferences, both stated (willingness to pay) and revealed (past purchases). Moreover, values are not merely ideals based on cognitive mechanisms responding to a set of principles – they are also socially constructed through practice [11–13].

Within Schwartz’s value theory [29,30], values are organized in a hierarchical structure reflecting universal motivational orientations: a set of 19 basic values (such as self-direction, benevolence, security, or power) grouped into four higher-order dimensions, namely Openness to Change, Conservation, Self-Enhancement, and Self-Transcendence (see Figure 1). The framework also distinguishes between a personal focus, encompassing values aimed at individual goals (Openness to Change and Self-Enhancement), and a social focus, encompassing values that prioritize social cohesion and collective well-being (Conservation and Self-Transcendence). This distinction is particularly relevant for interpreting the food values analysed here, several of which fall within the social-focus domains (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. Proposed circular motivational continuum of 19 values with sources that underlie their order. Reprinted from Schwartz et al. 2012 [30], p. 7, with permission from the American Psychological Association. Copyright 2012.

In the context of AFNs, values may also play a role in structuring interactions and coordination among actors. They can provide shared frameworks that help to guide collective action, for example, by defining priorities and contributions to food system change [15], supporting public policies appropriate for the local and regional scales [20], and improving access to information and transparency within the food chain [31].

Several studies have sought to reveal how different food-related values are prioritized in various contexts using the Best–Worst Scaling method, including Lusk and Briggeman (2009) [16], based upon a sample of U.S. households; Piracci et al. (2023) [6], with consumers from Denmark and Italy; and Yang et al. (2021) [15], with consumers of imported fruits and vegetables in Japan, Taiwan, and Indonesia. The findings of these studies provide insights into the priorities of different consumer groups and help to anticipate the potential effects of their combined choices on their surrounding environment.

Previous studies have shown that, due to a range of factors [32,33], food-related values do not always translate directly into actual purchases. The aforementioned factors may be endogenous to the individual consumer (e.g., awareness and knowledge, purchasing power, time availability, and consumption habits) or exogenous (e.g., economic, logistical, institutional, social, and cultural conditions). Therefore, strategies aimed at scaling up sustainable food consumption should consider not only consumers' value orientations but also the broader structural conditions and barriers shaping participation. Research on local food and short food supply chains has further shown that such barriers are not uniform across consumers and may include higher prices, limited availability, and inconvenience, as well as difficulties related to accessibility and the possibility of purchasing a wider range of products through these channels [34–36]. In this sense, barriers to sustainable food consumption may also constrain a more mainstream adoption of AFNs. Exploring perceived barriers alongside food-related values is therefore important for understanding the practical conditions under which sustainable consumption takes place within AFNs.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Study Area

The present paper focuses upon consumers who participate in Alternative Food Networks (AFNs), specifically consumer groups and farmers' markets, in two geographical areas: the Florence–Prato–Pisa polycentric metropolitan system (central-western Tuscany, Italy) and the Autonomous Region of Madrid (Spain). The selection of these two territories responds to a contrasting-cases logic: both belong to Southern European Mediterranean contexts, with comparable food cultures and a consolidated presence of the same two AFN formats; against this common background, however, they present markedly different socio-territorial trajectories, as described below. This combination of broadly comparable settings and contrasting trajectories provides an appropriate basis for exploring how territorial context may relate to the configuration of food-related values and perceived barriers. The study was conducted within the framework of a coordinated research project involving research institutions in both territories (see Funding), which provided in-depth local knowledge of the AFN landscape in each context, direct access to the initiatives studied, and the capacity to administer the survey in both languages while preserving conceptual equivalence.

The Florence–Prato–Pisa polycentric metropolitan system (henceforth called “central-western Tuscany”), covering approximately 4000 km², presents a mixed context integrating urban centres and peri-urban areas. With nearly 2 million inhabitants and a relatively high density, concentrated around the metropolitan areas of Florence, Prato, and Pisa, the area still contains quite a lot of agricultural land, particularly in the surrounding hilly rural zones, but also in the peri-urban belts. Tuscany is characterised by an agricultural model with strong local links, rooted in a long-standing tradition of quality-oriented production and territorial identity, with fewer “modern” intensive production techniques and a structure mainly comprising small to medium-sized farms: around 90% of the farms are sole proprietorships or family-run businesses, accounting for 63.5% of the utilised agricultural area (UAA) [37].

Traditionally, the farmers' markets in the area date back to the early 1970s, when they emerged as part of farmers' search for alternatives to the dominant industrial agri-food model. In recent years, these markets have increasingly aroused the interest, not only of consumers [38], but also of public actors, in particular, the regional and local authorities, who have begun to recognize their role in local development and have actively supported their promotion [39]. Farmers' markets can currently be found throughout the territory, differing in terms of promoters, governance structures, and organisational and functioning modalities [40]. The majority are promoted by major nationwide farmers' markets networks—such as Campagna Amica by Coldiretti, La Spesa in Campagna by Confederazione Italiana Agricoltori, and Mercati della Terra by the Slow Food movement—or by smaller independent producers and/or consumers associations.

Consumer groups (in Italian, mostly referred to as Gruppi di Acquisto Solidale—GAS), began to spread in Tuscany in the mid-90s, with a substantial increase in their numbers since 2000–2001. Starting off as informal groups, some more structured initiatives can now be found as well, sometimes organised in networks or acting within bigger organisations, and mainly active within urban contexts. GAS are non-profit consumer associations oriented toward critical consumption, based upon principles of ethics, social solidarity, and environmental sustainability; they represent the most widespread form of self-organized consumer groups in Italy. For some farms, GAS have also become an important marketing channel, encouraging greater crop diversification in response to consumers' demand for variety, while facing challenges related to continuity over time and seasonal fluctuations in demand [41,42].

In contrast, the Region of Madrid, with approximately 7 million inhabitants and an area of 8028 km², constitutes a predominantly urban environment. This metropolitan setting is marked by a long-term decline in agricultural activity and by a very low degree of food self-sufficiency. The agricultural sector is also characterized by an ageing farming population and a farm structure in which around 90% of farms are managed by individual farmers, representing 73.9% of the UAA (Spanish Survey on the Structure of Agricultural Holdings, 2023, available at: <https://ine.es/dyngs/Prensa/en/mEEEA2023.htm>, accessed on 1 March 2026). Within this context, however, agroecological production has emerged as a relatively young subsector, which is in its early stages but is expanding nonetheless; it exhibits a clear orientation toward short marketing channels and proximity-based distribution [43].

In this territory, initiatives addressing ecological and local consumption grew gradually from the 1990s, with a much more intense surge since 2011, encouraged by the collective action of citizens' movements and, in particular, by the 2011 15M movement (a nationwide civic protest movement in Spain advocating democratic renewal and social justice), which strengthened public awareness of sustainability and agroecology [43,44]. This context fostered the proliferation and gradual consolidation of initiatives such as consumer groups, community-supported agriculture (CSA) initiatives, the socio-political platform Madrid Agroecológico, the emerging food hub Unión de Huertas Agroecológicas de Madrid (UHAM), cooperative supermarkets (La Osa, Biolíbere, etc.), and the Red de Huertos Urbanos de Madrid, reflecting an agroecological movement that has largely taken shape in recent years.

Farmers' markets in Madrid constitute a relatively recent phenomenon within the regional food landscape. They do not represent the survival of a long-standing urban tradition, but rather began to re-emerge only in the early 2010s. These markets operate as periodic spaces for direct sale, often one weekend per month, where farmers and artisanal food producers sell directly to consumers. Their governance is diverse, including public-institutional, private-entrepreneurial, and municipal initiatives, while producers' participation in strategic decision-making generally remains limited; the markets have also developed differentiated profiles, from rural-productive orientations to others more associated with gastronomy and ecological or artisanal consumption [45].

Consumer groups in Madrid emerged in the late 1990s, initially linked to anti-globalization activism, solidarity economy networks, and politicized urban environments such as Lavapiés and Vallecas. During the early 2000s they became more structured through cooperative production-consumption models, and their expansion accelerated after the 2007 crisis and especially following the 15M movement, which helped associate agroecological food practices with a wider criticism of the neoliberal model. Although their profiles have diversified over time, these groups continue to be characterized by self-management, horizontal decision-making, the collective organization of distribution tasks, and a strong dependence on dense local social networks [44,46].

3.2. Sampling

In both territories, our samples are composed of consumers participating in farmers' markets and consumer groups. These formats were chosen for three reasons: both have a relevant and well-established presence in the two territories; they represent two complementary organizational logics of consumer engagement, namely individual direct purchase from producers and collective self-organized provisioning; and using the same formats in both contexts held the organizational dimension constant, reducing variation associated with organizational form and facilitating the comparative analysis of value prioritization and perceived barriers across contexts.

To estimate the number of initiatives and consumers involved in AFNs in each territory, we drew on the most appropriate source available in each case. For Madrid, we used an existing inventory of alternative and sustainable food initiatives in the region (Proyecto Alisos, <https://sigyhd.cchs.csic.es/ProyectoAlisos/>, accessed on 1 March 2026), completed in 2024, which identified nine farmers' markets and 144 consumer groups. For central-western Tuscany, where no comparable inventory exists, we conducted seven semi-structured interviews with representatives of the initiatives where the survey was administered, in order to identify active initiatives and contextualize the sampling frame: three with the coordinators of consumer groups (GAS Pisa in Pisa, and GAS Bronzino and GAS San Frediano in Florence) and four with the coordinators of farmers' markets (the Parterre and Piazza Alberti markets in Florence, both within the La Spesa in Campagna by CIA; the Madonna dell'Ulivo and Sacra Famiglia markets, within the Campagna Amica by Coldiretti; and the Terra di Prato market in Prato). These interviews helped identify the main initiatives and contextualize the analysis.

A convenience sampling approach was used in both territories, based on the availability and accessibility of consumers participating in the initiatives studied. Data collection targeted approximately 50 questionnaires per AFN format in each territory, administered on-site during market openings and consumer group activities across multiple field-work visits. People were eligible if they were regularly involved in the initiative or, in the case of consumer groups, active members. While this approach enabled direct access to engaged AFN consumers, it implies that the resulting samples are not statistically representative of the broader population of AFN consumers in either territory, or of the general public. Findings should therefore be interpreted as reflecting the specific value configurations and perceived barriers of the consumers surveyed within these initiatives, rather than as generalisable estimates of population-level preferences.

In central-western Tuscany, the sample consisted of 49 consumers from GAS and 57 from farmers' markets. In the Region of Madrid, we included 80 members of consumer groups and 47 from farmers' markets (Table 1).

Table 1. Estimated number of consumers in the initiatives studied, opening frequency, and number of questionnaires conducted.

Initiative Type	Country	Estimated Number of Consumers per Opening Day *	Opening Frequency	Number of Questionnaires
Consumer Groups	Italy	40–50 families	Weekly	49
Farmers' Markets	Italy	150–200 people (small markets)/1500 people (large markets)	Weekly	57
Consumer Groups	Spain	40 families	Weekly	80
Farmers' Markets	Spain	2000–2500 people	Monthly or bi-monthly	47

* Estimates are based on information provided by organisers and coordinators of markets and groups, as well as by the inventory of initiatives used as a reference in Madrid.

3.3. Survey

The questionnaire was organized in three sections: the first addressed shopping routines and barriers perceived in relation to accessing foods considered to be sustainable. To ensure clarity for respondents and conceptual equivalence across contexts, the survey referred to the object of study through locally established terms: *alimento ecológico* (ecological food) in Spain and *prodotto di filiera corta* (short food supply chain product) in Italy. Among participants in the initiatives studied, these terms function as meaningful and shared categories that consumers readily associate with alternative and sustainability-oriented food provisioning in their respective contexts. While neither term in its strict technical sense

exhausts the multidimensional concept of sustainability [25,26], both operate as widely recognizable markers of sustainable consumption among consumers in AFNs, and reflect the actual attributes of the food products circulating in these networks. The second section assessed the relative importance of food values, engagement in other types of activism, and sustainable and ethical consumption habits; the third collected sociodemographic data in order to characterize the sample. The questionnaire was originally written in Spanish and then translated into Italian by native Italian-speaking researchers, thus ensuring that the terms adequately captured the intended conceptual meaning, particularly with regard to the values analysed.

In the second section dedicated to values, the Best–Worst Scaling (BWS) technique was employed. This method is widely used for establishing preference hierarchies, because it enables respondents to repeatedly select the most and least important items within a given set, which provides a robust measure of relative importance and reduces biases commonly associated with traditional rating scales [47,48]. We employed a Balanced Incomplete Block Design (BIBD), an experimental design in which the full set of items is distributed across smaller blocks so that each item appears a balanced number of times, to structure the choice sets. The design consisted of seven blocks, each of these with three items (Table 2), which ensured a complete and balanced distribution of the seven values across choice sets while minimizing the cognitive burden for respondents.

Table 2. Example of a best–worst question in the survey questionnaire.

Which of the following values is the most important and which is the least important when you decide to purchase your food? (Consider all of the following elements. Select the one you feel is the most important and the one you feel is the least important. Repeat this each time you see a list of items).		
Least Important	Values	Most Important
	Food appearance	
	Sense of community	
	Localness	

Our research team employed the pertinent literature [6,15,16,49] to pre-select the food values analysed in the present paper. The aim, therefore, was not to identify new values inductively, but rather to rank those considered most relevant within a defined conceptual framework.

The questionnaire included seven values for prioritization, four of which focused on themes of public or social interest (*environmental sustainability, sense of community, localness, and social justice and economic equity*), and three on themes of private or personal interest (*health care, price, and food appearance*). These values were classified according to Schwartz’s theory of basic human values for further analysis (Table 3).

Table 3. Classification of food-related values according to Schwartz’s Theory of Basic Human Values.

Food Value	Operational Definition	Motivational Types of Values (Schwartz) *	Higher-Order Value Dimension (Schwartz) *
Environmental sustainability	Perceived responsible use of natural resources in food production.	Universalism–Nature	Self-Transcendence/Social focus
Sense of community	Sense of belonging and connection among the members of a group possessing common interests, values, and aspirations.	Security–Societal	Conservation/Social focus
Localness	Preference for food produced in the region.	Tradition	Conservation/Social focus
Social justice and economic equity	Perception that agents along the food chain are fairly remunerated and treated equitably.	Universalism–Concern	Self-Transcendence/Social focus

Health care	Perception that the food product is good for one's health.	Security–Personal	Conservation/Personal focus
Price	Perceived price paid for the food product.	Power–Resources	Self-Enhancement/Personal focus
Food appearance	Perception that food products have an attractive appearance.	Hedonism	Self-Enhancement/Personal focus

* Based on Schwartz's value theory (Schwartz, 1994 [29]; Schwartz et al., 2012 [30]).

3.4. Data Analysis

For each participant and each food value, a Best–Worst score (BW_{ij}) was calculated as the difference between the number of times the specific food value was selected as the most important (“Best”) and the number of times it was selected as the least important (“Worst”):

$BW_{ij} = B_{ij} - W_{ij}$, where B_{ij} and W_{ij} denote the number of times food value i was selected as “Best” and “Worst” by participant j , respectively.

To standardize the results and facilitate comparison across items, BW scores were normalized (NBW_{ij}) by dividing each score by the total number of appearances of that item in the questionnaire for the corresponding participant (N_{ij}), as determined by the Balanced Incomplete Block Design. This procedure yielded values ranging from −1 to 1:

$NBW_{ij} = BW_{ij}/N_{ij}$, where NBW_{ij} denotes the normalized BW score for food value i and participant j .

At the aggregate level, NBW_i refers to the normalized Best–Worst score for food value i , calculated by averaging individual NBW_{ij} scores across the sample of participants.

Values were then ranked according to these normalized scores to determine their relative importance within each territory. Normality tests (Shapiro–Wilk) indicated non-normal distributions for most variables; differences between territories were therefore assessed by means of the Mann–Whitney U test. p -values were adjusted using the False Discovery Rate (FDR) correction to account for multiple comparisons and reduce the likelihood of false positives.

To assess whether the observed territorial differences in value prioritization could be attributed to demographic variation between samples rather than to territorial context per se, a complementary set of OLS regression models was estimated, one for each food value, with normalized BWS scores as the dependent variable. Region was included as the key explanatory variable, alongside education, income, AFN channel type, age, and gender as control variables. Given the bounded continuous nature of the dependent variable and evidence of heteroskedasticity, heteroskedasticity-consistent standard errors (HC3) were employed. Variance inflation factors (VIFs) confirmed the absence of multicollinearity among predictors (all VIF < 1.3). Cases with missing demographic data were excluded via listwise deletion, yielding an analytical sample of 215 respondents.

4. Results

Sociodemographic analysis of the sample (Table 4) shows that, among participants in AFNs, women predominate in the sample in both territories (66.2% in central-western Tuscany and 64.2% in Madrid), whereas central-western Tuscany presents an older respondent profile, with 20.3% of individuals over 64 years compared to 9% in Madrid. In terms of education, Madrid stands out for its higher educational levels: 42.1% of consumers possess a master's degree or doctorate, practically twice that of the 22.5% observed in central-western Tuscany. Income levels differ moderately between the two samples. Madrid displays a higher proportion of respondents in the lowest income category (15.4% versus 5.4%), whereas central-western Tuscany shows slightly higher proportions in the

upper-middle income ranges, and the €20,000–€40,000 category is the most represented in both territories.

Regarding consumption habits, ecological food products represent over 75% of the shopping basket for 18.9% of households in Madrid, while in central-western Tuscany short food supply chain products reach this share for 8.5% of households.

Table 4. Sociodemographic characteristics of the sample of consumers in central-western Tuscany and Madrid.

Variable	Central-Western Tuscany (N = 106) %		Madrid (N = 127) %	
Gender				
	Female	66.2		64.2
	Male	32.4		35.0
	Other	1.4		0.8
Age				
	<35	12.2		9.0
	35–44	16.2		18.9
	45–54	24.3		35.2
	55–64	27.0		27.9
	>64	20.3		9.0
Education				
	Secondary education and VET	28.2		10.7
	University	49.3		47.1
	Master/Doctorate	22.5		42.1
Occupation				
	Student	0		2.4
	Working	83.3		77.2
	Unemployed	0		6.5
	Retired	16.7		13.8
Average annual gross income				
	Less than 20,000€	5.4		15.4
	From 20,000 to 40,000€	37.8		39.8
	From 40,000 to 60,000€	28.4		24.4
	From 60,000 to 80,000€	17.6		12.2
	Over 80,000€	10.8		8.1
Percentage of ecological (Madrid)/short food supply chain (Tuscany) products in the basket				
	Up to 25	32.9		21.3
	Between 26 and 50	39.0		36.2
	Between 51 and 75	19.5		23.6
	Between 76 and 100	8.5		18.9
Type of AFN initiative				
	Farmers' markets	54.0		37.0
	Consumer groups	46.0		63.0

Table 5 presents a detailed ranking of the prioritization of values in each territory. In general, *health care*, a personal-focus value associated with Conservation, ranks among the highest priorities in both territories. In contrast, *price* and *food appearance*, as well as personal-focus values linked to Self-Enhancement, tend to score lower in the ranking.

Table 5. Ranking, mean, and median normalized Best–Worst scores of food-related values in central-western Tuscany and Madrid.

Variable	Central-Western Tuscany			Madrid		
	Ranking	Mean	Median	Ranking	Mean	Median
Health Care	1	0.47	0.67	2	0.39	0.50

Localness	2	0.35	0.33	4	0.10	0.00
Environmental sustainability	3	0.22	0.33	1	0.51	0.67
Social justice and economic equity	4	0.08	0.00	3	0.37	0.50
Sense of community	5	−0.20	0.00	5	−0.07	0.00
Price	6	−0.39	−0.33	6	−0.39	−0.67
Food appearance	7	−0.56	−0.67	7	−0.87	−1.00

Notes: Mean/Median: central tendency of the normalized Best–Worst scores (−1 to 1) for each attribute. Ranking: 1 = most important, 7 = least important. Rankings are based on mean normalized Best–Worst scores. Median values generally confirm the same overall pattern, although some ties are observed.

Table 6 presents the results of the statistical tests comparing the normalized BW scores between central-western Tuscany and Madrid. Median normalized Best–Worst scores and interquartile ranges (IQRs) are reported as descriptive statistics, given the non-normal distribution of most variables. Regional differences were assessed using Mann–Whitney U tests based on rank distributions, with *p*-values adjusted using the False Discovery Rate correction. *Localness* ($p < 0.001$), *social justice and economic equity* ($p < 0.001$), *food appearance* ($p < 0.001$), and *environmental sustainability* ($p < 0.001$) show significant differences between the two territories, whereas *health care* ($p = 0.451$), *sense of community* ($p = 0.105$), and *price* ($p = 0.285$) do not show significant differences.

Table 6. Comparison of normalized BW scores between Madrid and central-western Tuscany (Median [IQR] and Mann–Whitney U test *p*-value, FDR adjusted).

Variable	Median Central-Western Tuscany [IQR]	Median Madrid [IQR]	<i>p</i> (FDR)	Significant
Health care	0.67 [1.00]	0.50 [1.00]	4.51×10^{-1}	No
Localness	0.33 [0.67]	0.00 [0.83]	4.21×10^{-5}	Yes
Social justice and economic equity	0.00 [0.66]	0.50 [0.67]	4.21×10^{-5}	Yes
Food appearance	−0.67 [0.67]	−1.00 [0.12]	2.44×10^{-7}	Yes
Environmental sustainability	0.33 [0.67]	0.67 [0.67]	4.21×10^{-5}	Yes
Sense of community	0.00 [0.67]	0.00 [0.83]	1.05×10^{-1}	No
Price	−0.33 [0.67]	−0.67 [0.67]	2.85×10^{-1}	No

Note: [IQR] indicates the interquartile range (Q3–Q1) of each normalized Best–Worst score. *p* (FDR) corresponds to the *p*-value adjusted using the False Discovery Rate to account for multiple comparisons. “Significant” indicates whether the difference between regions is statistically significant (FDR < 0.05).

To examine whether the territorial differences identified above might be attributable to demographic variation between samples, OLS regression models were estimated for each food value, with education, income, AFN channel type, age, and gender as control variables alongside region (Table 7). Region retained a statistically significant effect on *environmental sustainability* ($\beta = 0.262$, $p < 0.001$), *localness* ($\beta = -0.305$, $p < 0.001$), *social justice and economic equity* ($\beta = 0.266$, $p < 0.01$), and *food appearance* ($\beta = -0.220$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that the territorial differences in these values are not accounted for by the demographic composition of the samples; no significant territorial effect was found for *health care*, *sense of community*, or *price*, consistent with the Mann–Whitney results. Among the control variables, AFN channel type predicted sense of community ($\beta = 0.285$, $p < 0.001$) and *health care* ($\beta = -0.227$, $p < 0.01$), education showed a modest association with *sense of community* ($\beta = 0.102$, $p < 0.05$) and gender with *health care* ($\beta = 0.192$, $p < 0.05$); and income and age showed no significant associations with any value.

Table 7. OLS regression coefficients for normalized BWS scores ($N = 215$).

Value	Region	Education	Income	AFN Type	Age	Gender	R ²
Environ-mental sus-tainability	0.262 ***	−0.014	−0.023	−0.045	−0.001	−0.064	0.072
Sense of community	0.078	0.102 *	0.012	0.285 ***	0.002	0.046	0.135
Localness	−0.305 ***	−0.001	0.014	−0.015	−0.002	0.020	0.124
Social jus-tice and economic equity	0.266 **	−0.061	0.046	0.144	−0.005	−0.118	0.106
Health care	−0.054	0.041	0.021	−0.227 **	0.006	0.192 *	0.094
Price	0.038	−0.021	−0.004	−0.068	−0.002	−0.014	0.010
Food ap-pearance	−0.220 ***	−0.087	−0.022	−0.058	−0.003	−0.096	0.143

Note: Region: 1 = Madrid, 0 = central-western Tuscany. Type: 1 = consumer group, 0 = farmers' market. Gender: 1 = female. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. Heteroskedasticity-consistent robust standard errors (HC3). Cases with missing demographic data excluded via listwise deletion ($N = 215$).

Figure 2 displays the mean normalized Best–Worst scores (NBWi) for the seven food-related values among respondents in the AFNs studied in central-western Tuscany and Madrid, allowing for the overall pattern of relative prioritization across values and territories to be visualized. Graphically, it highlights a broadly similar overall profile in both territories, with *health care* among the most highly prioritized values and *price* and *food appearance* occupying the lowest relative positions. At the same time, the figure reveals the differences between the two territories in the relative positioning of the intermediate values. As shown by the data in Table 5 and Table 6, ranking and median values are comparatively higher in central-western Tuscany for *localness*, whereas Madrid shows comparatively higher ranking and median values for *social justice and economic equity* and *environmental sustainability*. The values are displayed in a radial chart organized according to the higher-order dimensions of Schwartz's value theory. This framework shows that, in both territories, the highest relative scores tend to cluster around values associated with Self-Transcendence and Conservation, whereas values linked to Self-Enhancement occupy the lowest relative positions.

Figure 3 presents the main barriers perceived by consumers in central-western Tuscany and the Region of Madrid on attempting to access sustainable food. In both territories, the limited variety of products on the shelves emerges as the most frequently reported obstacle, accounting for 48% of responses in central-western Tuscany and 37% in Madrid, followed by price (22% and 30%, respectively). These results show shared structural constraints affecting participation in AFNs across territories. Nonetheless, some differences in relative emphasis can be observed. Accessibility barriers are reported more frequently in Madrid (17%) than in central-western Tuscany (13%), whereas time-related constraints appear to be slightly more prominent in central-western Tuscany (16%) compared with Madrid (9%). These differences suggest that the specific accessibility conditions of AFNs may vary across territorial contexts.

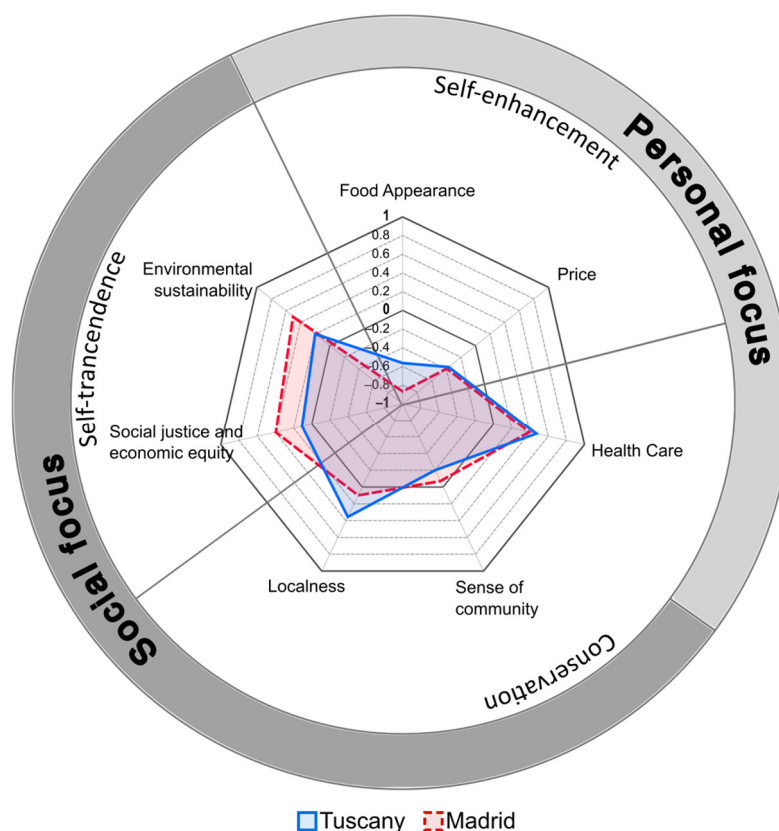


Figure 2. Relative prioritization of consumer food values in the two territories, based on mean normalized Best–Worst scores (NBWi). Values are arranged according to Schwartz's (2012) higher-order value dimensions [30]. Note: NBWi ranges from -1 to 1 . Values closer to 1 indicate greater relative importance, whereas values closer to -1 indicate lesser relative importance.

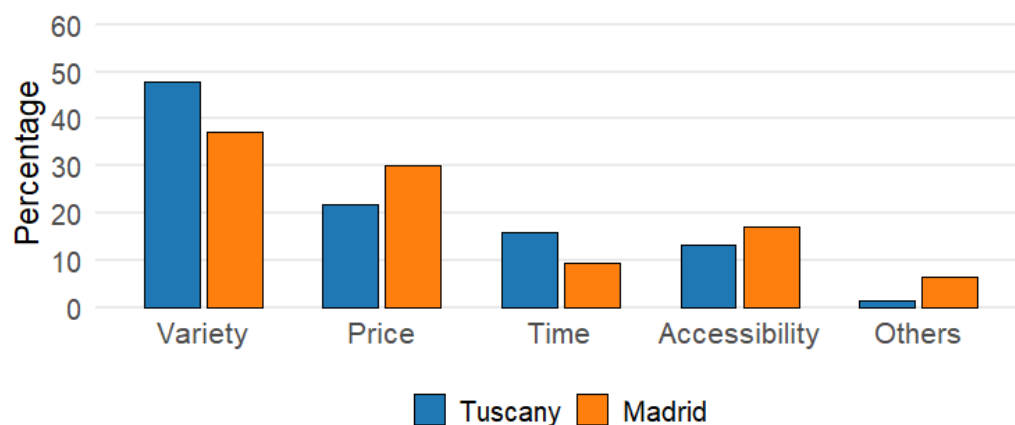


Figure 3. Perceived barriers preventing access to sustainable food options among AFN consumers in central-western Tuscany and the Region of Madrid. Note: Percentages were calculated as the share of total barrier mentions within each territory, since multiple responses were allowed.

Figure 4 shows the frequency of sustainable and ethical consumption habits reported in both territories, revealing high levels of commitment to sustainability: combining the categories “Always” and “Often”, waste separation reaches 99% in both contexts, and preference for fair-trade products and demand for nutritional information are similarly high. The main contrasts concern the use of public transport, more frequent in Madrid (70% versus 44%), and the reduction in animal-based food consumption, more widespread in central-western Tuscany (48% versus 29%).

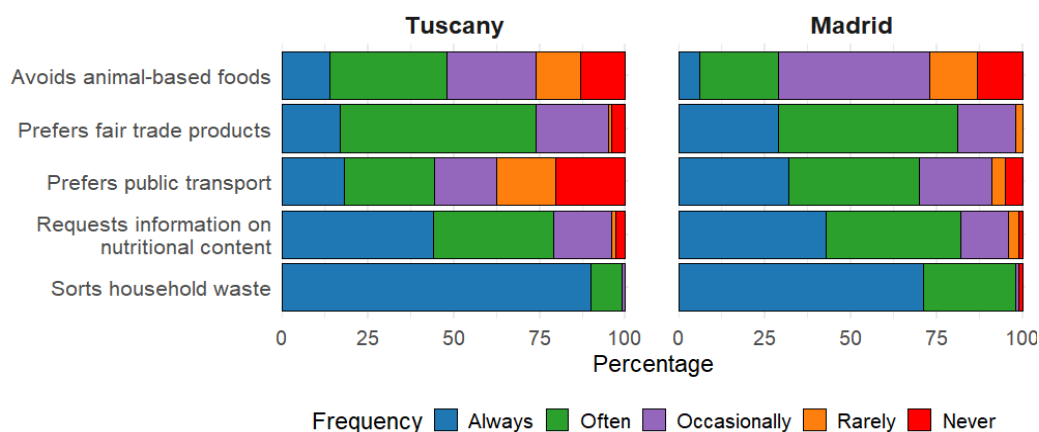


Figure 4. Frequency of self-reported sustainable consumption habits among AFN consumers in central-western Tuscany and Madrid.

The questionnaire also explored respondents' engagement in forms of activism beyond their participation in the AFN initiatives addressed herein. This engagement was reported by 59% of respondents in central-western Tuscany and 73% in Madrid, mainly through involvement in food-related, social, political, and environmental organizations.

5. Discussion

The present research explored the way in which food-related values and perceived barriers are expressed by consumers participating in Alternative Food Networks (AFNs); it focuses upon consumer groups and farmers' markets in two contexts: central-western Tuscany and the Region of Madrid. Results show that, although health-related concerns take centre stage in both territories, the relative prioritization of other food values varies across territories, following a pattern related to the different quality orientations embedded in the AFNs in each territory. Overall, these findings support the analytical premise that territorial context matters with regard to understanding value hierarchies within AFNs.

Territorial context does not determine value priorities directly; rather, it may operate as a condition that structures the way in which attributes of food quality are recognized and hierarchized in AFNs, shaped by place-based histories, institutional configurations, and actor networks [2,10]. The differentiated patterns observed between central-western Tuscany and the Region of Madrid can therefore be interpreted as configurations that are contextually situated and which emerge within distinct socio-territorial trajectories. This interpretation is further supported by the multivariate analysis reported in Section 4, which indicates that territorial differences in *environmental sustainability*, *localness*, *social justice and economic equity*, and *food appearance* persist after controlling for education, income, AFN channel type, age, and gender simultaneously, suggesting that these patterns are not accounted for by the demographic composition of the samples. It should also be noted that the convenience sampling approach employed limits the external validity of these findings. The patterns observed reflect the specific consumers engaged in the AFN initiatives studied and cannot be extrapolated to the broader population of AFN consumers or to the general public in either territory.

Employing Schwartz's theory of basic human values to interpret these patterns helps to explain how consumers evaluate motivational orientations across contexts [29,30]. In both territories, *health care* consistently holds a pivotal position, indicating that concerns related to personal safety and well-being remain central. Participation in AFNs therefore appears to integrate self-regarding motivations within broader ethical considerations, ra-

ther than displacing them [2,7]. Within Schwartz's circumplex structure, this coexistence is theoretically coherent: *health care* expresses Security–Personal motivations within the Conservation dimension, adjacent to and motivationally compatible with the Self-Transcendence values of *environmental sustainability* and *social justice and economic equity*; the genuine motivational tension runs instead with Self-Enhancement values such as *price* and *food appearance*, consistently deprioritized in both territories. Concern for one's own health may thus function as an accessible entry point into AFN participation, while engagement in these networks embeds that concern within wider collective commitments.

At the same time, statistically significant differences emerge in other value domains. In central-western Tuscany, *localness* is given greater importance, reflecting Conservation-related motivations linked to territorial attachment, the preservation of traditions, and continuity. Consumers in Madrid, by contrast, assign greater relative importance to *environmental sustainability* and *social justice and economic equity*, values associated with Self-Transcendence and concern for collective and ecological well-being. These differences do not signal opposing value systems but distinct configurations within a shared motivational structure: consistent with Schwartz's circumplex model, Conservation and Self-Transcendence values tend to occupy higher positions, whereas Self-Enhancement values such as *price* and *food appearance* are comparatively deprioritized in both territories. Previous Best–Worst Scaling studies similarly show that value hierarchies vary across contexts, reinforcing the interpretation that prioritization is context-dependent [6,15].

The differentiated weighting of value domains can also be understood in relation to the literature on the “quality turn” in agri-food studies. As Goodman (2003) [24] postulates, food quality is not an intrinsic property, but a relational construct negotiated within specific socio-territorial settings. Attributes such as origin, environmental performance, or social equity gain meaning through relationships between actors and stakeholders, within initiatives and cultural frameworks that determine how they are recognized and prioritized [50].

From this perspective, the hierarchization of food-related values among people participating in consumer groups and farmers' markets may reflect the relative salience of different quality approaches in each territory. In central-western Tuscany, the stronger emphasis on *localness* and short food supply chains is compatible with approaches that foreground territorial identity and proximity and may also relate to the presence of well-established territorial food quality regimes; therein, identity-based differentiation linked to origin and local production has long played an important role in regional agri-food dynamics [8]. In Madrid, by contrast, the higher prioritization of *environmental sustainability* and *social justice and economic equity* resonates with approaches emphasizing socio-ecological transformation and collective responsibility. This pattern is consistent with the development of agroecological consumption initiatives in this territory, many of which have emerged in connection with civic mobilization and urban agroecological networks [43,51]. In both territories, however, the initiatives analysed represent relatively small segments of the broader food system.

These context-specific configurations can be further interpreted in light of the distinction between LAFSs and LAEFSs put forward in the literature [8,27]. LAFSs have been associated with differentiation grounded in territorial identity, origin, and proximity, in which localness itself constitutes a central axis of value. LAEFSs, on the other hand, highlight environmental sustainability, social equity, and agroecological principles; localness is valued here not as an end in itself but as a condition enabling agroecological production and more equitable relations along the food chain. The patterns observed display partial empirical affinities between consumers' value configurations and these distinctions: locally anchored attributes receive greater relative emphasis in central-western Tuscany, whereas environmental and equity-related values are given greater priority in Madrid.

These affinities are consistent with the socio-territorial trajectories described in Section 3.1: farmers' markets in Tuscany emerged in the 1970s from producers' initiatives within a long-standing tradition of identity-based quality production, while most initiatives in Madrid developed recently in connection with civic mobilization and urban agroecological networks.

These correspondences should not be interpreted as categorical classifications of the territories studied, but rather as indicative of how locally embedded AFNs may reflect different combinations of quality approaches and value orientations. The present study approached these configurations from the consumer side, a perspective that has so far received limited empirical attention in the characterization of these analytical categories. The findings therefore suggest that the distinction between LAFSs and LAEFSs is expressed not only in organizational and productive structures, as emphasized in the literature, but also in the value configurations of the consumers participating in these networks. Extending this analysis to the organizational structures, governance mechanisms, and supply-chain characteristics of AFNs in each territory would allow these configurations to be examined across the entire food chain, integrating both the production and consumption sides, which constitutes a promising avenue for future research.

Beyond these territorial differences, the multivariate analysis also points to the role of the AFN format. While the prioritization of health care does not differ between territories, it varies across formats, being higher among farmers' market consumers than among consumer group members. A possible interpretation is that the closer relationship and shared understanding between consumers and producers in consumer groups, grounded in direct knowledge of how food is produced, leads members to take the healthiness of their food for granted, so that health is less often singled out as an explicit value, not because it matters less but because it is already embedded in this form of participation. A channel effect in the opposite direction is observed for sense of community, which receives greater relative importance among consumer group members, consistent with the more collective and relational nature of these initiatives, where regular interaction and shared organization may foster community-oriented values more strongly than the predominantly individual purchasing relationship of farmers' markets.

Analysis of the barriers perceived provides a structural dimension to these interpretations. In both territories, limited product variety in AFN outlets and high prices emerge as the most frequently reported obstacles to increased consumption. However, the comparative pattern also reveals context-specific differences. In central-western Tuscany, product variety and time constraints are seen to be comparatively more salient, whereas in Madrid greater weight is given to price, accessibility difficulties, and other access-related constraints, particularly those associated with restricted opening days and schedules. This suggests that, apart from certain mutual limitations, participation in AFNs continues to be conditioned by urban, organizational, and structural constraints that transcend individual motivations. Such findings are consistent with some studies that highlight the structural and logistical limitations affecting alternative food initiatives [34,35,50]. Accessibility is therefore shaped not only by consumer-side constraints but also by territorially embedded organizational conditions; these include urban configuration, operational formats, and the territorial organization of distribution and sales infrastructures [2,23]. In this sense, the structural and territorially embedded nature of these barriers suggests that responses to them are likely to require coordination mechanisms and shared infrastructures on the supply side, rather than action on consumer motivations alone [52].

Beyond a comparison of specific cases, these results contribute to debates on the role of AFNs in food system transformation, suggesting that these initiatives do not present a homogeneous ethical orientation across contexts. Rather, AFNs may function less as carriers of a single alternative logic and more as arenas in which different configurations of

quality, responsibility, and territorial attachment are articulated and negotiated among stakeholders, in line with perspectives that view food system transitions as contextually situated processes dependent on the alignment between value dispositions, organizational infrastructures, and collective action capacities [19,20,53]. Integrating value theory, quality approaches, and territorial embeddedness within a comparative design thus illustrates how value hierarchization in AFNs is intertwined with local institutional and cultural dynamics.

6. Conclusions

The present paper explores how food-related values and perceived barriers are articulated among consumers of Alternative Food Networks (AFNs) in central-western Tuscany and the Region of Madrid. Results show that, although health concerns are central in both territories, the relative priority given to other food values varies across them, indicating that territorial context matters not as a form of direct determination but as a contextual condition associated with differentiated value configurations.

From a theoretical perspective, these results contribute to ongoing debates on the role of AFNs in food system transformation by suggesting that participation in these initiatives does not reflect one homogeneous ethical orientation. Instead, prioritization of food-related values appears to reflect locally embedded configurations shaped by quality approaches and institutional environments specific to the local context. By integrating Schwartz's value theory with perspectives referring to the quality turn and to territorial embeddedness, the present investigation provides a framework for interpreting how value hierarchies associated with sustainable consumption are configured across territorial contexts, offering consumer-side evidence consistent with the distinction between Local Agri-Food Systems (LAFSs) and Local Agroecological Food Systems (LAEFSs) proposed in the literature.

Methodologically, the study illustrates the analytical potential of combining Best-Worst Scaling with a comparative territorial design in order to examine how value prioritization and perceived barriers are articulated among AFN consumers.

These findings also carry practical implications for AFN operators and local governments. The convergence of perceived barriers across territories, where limited product variety and price emerge as the main obstacles, points to the relevance of supply-side coordination: alliances among producers could broaden the range of products available through these channels [42], while collaborative logistics and shared infrastructures, such as food hubs, could reduce operational costs and ease price-related barriers [52]. At the same time, the territorial specificity of both barriers and value hierarchies suggests that such measures should be adapted to each context rather than applied uniformly, aligning the design and communication of AFN initiatives with the value configurations prevailing in each territory; this may contribute both to consolidating existing participation and to widening access to these networks.

Our results should be interpreted in light of certain limitations, which in turn delineate directions for future research. The sample restricts generalization beyond the consumers involved, and the analysis focuses on two AFN formats in each territory; broader sampling strategies, other formats, and replication in additional territorial contexts would allow us to assess whether the configurations identified here correspond to wider patterns. The study approached these configurations from the consumer side; extending the analysis to organizational structures, governance mechanisms, and supply-chain characteristics would allow them to be examined across the entire food chain. Finally, since the cross-sectional design does not permit causal inference, longitudinal designs could explore how value hierarchies evolve in relation to the organizational and institutional dynamics shaping these initiatives. Within these boundaries, the study provides analytically

grounded insights into how value hierarchization and perceived barriers are articulated within territorially embedded AFNs.

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Institutional Review Board Statement: The research was based on a fully anonymous, voluntary, non-interventional questionnaire. It did not collect personal data, clinical information, signatures, contact details, identification numbers, IP addresses, or any other information that would allow participants to be identified, directly or indirectly. Therefore, the responses could not be linked to individual participants. Ethical review and approval were waived for this study by Regulation (EU) 2016/679, the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), the data analysed and reported in the manuscript are presented only in anonymous and aggregated form.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all participants involved in the study. No personal or identifiable data were collected.

Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy and ethical restrictions.

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

AFN	Alternative Food Networks
BWS	Best–Worst Scaling
CSA	Community Supported Agriculture
GAS	Gruppi di Acquisto Solidale
LAFSs	Local Agri-Food Systems
LAEFSs	Local Agroecological Food Systems

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