ETHICAL FOOD, PERCEPTION AND CHALLENGES:
THE CASE OF ALBANIAN CONSUMERS

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Abstract

This article examines the importance of ethical food through a comprehensive literature review and an empirical investigation of consumer perceptions among Albanian consumers. Drawing on recent bibliometric studies, analyses of ethical decision-making in agribusiness, and discussions on policy imperatives, the study identifies five key challenges in food ethics: sustainability and climate change, fair trade and labor rights, animal welfare, food security and accessibility, and consumer misinformation regarding labeling. A mixed-methods approach—integrating a systematic review with a structured consumer questionnaire—reveals that while a majority of respondents recognize the importance of ethical food production, concerns remain about the cost, transparency, and reliability of ethical claims. The findings underscore the need for robust regulatory frameworks, consumer education, and industry reforms to bridge the gap between ethical intent and practice.

Keywords: Ethical food, Customer perceptions, Albanian consumers, Components of ethical food, Challenges for ethical food

INTRODUCTION

Ethical food has emerged as a critical field of inquiry at the intersection of consumer behavior, environmental sustainability, animal welfare, and social justice. In recent years, growing scholarly and public interest has spurred extensive research into how moral considerations influence food production, sourcing, and consumption. Studies range from bibliometric examinations of ethical food consumption trends to detailed analyses of determinants of ethics related to food proposing a policy framework designed to address food insecurity and sustainability. These diverse perspectives underscore that ethical food is not only a matter of individual consumer choice but also a broader societal imperative requiring systemic policy responses.

In today's rapidly evolving global food landscape, ethical food has emerged as a critical focal point for consumers, businesses, and policymakers alike. As challenges such as climate change, environmental degradation, and social inequities intensify, the need to reassess how food is produced, distributed, and consumed has never been more urgent. Ethical food transcends simple product labeling—it embodies a comprehensive commitment to sustainable agricultural practices, fair labor conditions, humane animal treatment, and transparent sourcing, while also addressing issues of food security and consumer misinformation.

Recent studies have illuminated the multifaceted nature of ethical food. For instance, Beciu et al. (2024) highlight a growing scholarly interest in ethical consumption trends, while Sandler (2024) and Barrientos & Dolan (2006) provide frameworks that underscore the moral imperatives underpinning food production and sourcing. Similarly, research by Rațiu and Mortan (2013) reveals the significance of integrating ethical decision-making within agribusiness strategies, and Miller and Thomas (2020) call for policy reforms that reconcile ethical considerations with food security imperatives.

This article focuses on understanding how these broad ethical concerns are perceived by Albanian consumers. By examining key challenges, including sustainability, fair trade, animal welfare, accessibility, and labeling transparency, the study seeks to bridge the gap between consumer awareness and practical implementation of ethical food practices. Ultimately, the goal is to provide insights that can inform more effective policy interventions and industry standards, thereby promoting a more sustainable, equitable, and resilient food system.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a mixed-methods design combining a comprehensive literature review with a cross-sectional survey targeting Albanian consumers. The survey is conducted online and face to face. 300 consumers in the urban area of Tirana participated in the survey. A

structured questionnaire was developed based on the following themes identified in the literature:

1. **Awareness and Perception:** Questions assessed whether respondents had heard of ethical food production and what elements they associated with it (e.g., fair wages, sustainable farming, animal welfare).

2. **Labor Rights and Gender Equality:** Items evaluated perceptions of fairness in treatment of food workers and gender disparities in the food industry.

3. **Environmental Responsibility:** Questions focused on the importance of environmental protection and the impact of food production practices on climate change.

4. **Animal Welfare:** Respondents were asked about their views on the treatment of animals in food production and their trust in various ethical claims (e.g., "free-range," "organic").

5. **Fair Trade and Accessibility:** Items examined perceptions of food pricing, accessibility of ethical products, and the influence of fair trade certifications.

6. **Consumer Misinformation & Labeling:** Questions assessed consumer understanding of ethical labels and the clarity of information provided on food packaging.

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics to summarize the levels of awareness, perceived importance, and concerns regarding ethical food production. Qualitative responses (from open-ended questions) were examined through thematic analysis, allowing for an in-depth understanding of consumer perceptions and the factors influencing their food choices. This mixed-methods approach enabled a comprehensive interpretation of both numerical trends and nuanced consumer insights.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Ethical food is a comprehensive and multifaceted concept that encompasses the entire spectrum of food production, distribution, and consumption through a moral lens. At its core, ethical food involves:

- **Production Ethics:** This focuses on sustainable agricultural practices that minimize environmental harm and ensure efficient use of resources. According to Beciu et al. (2024), such practices are essential for reducing the ecological footprint of food production while preserving natural resources for future generations.

- **Sourcing and Supply Chain Ethics:** Ethical food also involves a commitment to fair trade, equitable labor practices, and transparency throughout the supply chain. As detailed by Barrientos & Dolan (2006), ensuring that all participants—from small-scale farmers to large-

scale distributors—are treated fairly is fundamental to creating a just and accountable food system.

- **Consumption Ethics:** An important aspect of ethical food is addressing the "attitude–behavior gap," where consumers' expressed ethical intentions do not always translate into their purchasing decisions. This discrepancy, highlighted in recent studies (Beciu et al., 2024), points to the need for better consumer education and more accessible ethical food options.

- **Policy and Governance:** Finally, ethical food extends to the realm of public policy and governance. Integrating ethical considerations into food policies and regulations helps create systems that protect vulnerable populations and the environment. Miller and Thomas (2020) and Mepham (2000) emphasize that such policies are vital for ensuring that ethical standards are upheld across the entire food system.

Ethical food is much more than a buzzword, it's a narrative that begins on the farm and continues through every stage of the food system. In other words, it is a farm where every decision is guided by the commitment to sustainability: fields are cultivated with methods that protect the soil, conserve water, and minimize chemical use, ensuring that nature's delicate balance is maintained. This is the essence of production ethics, as highlighted by Beciu et al. (2024), where the focus is on using resources wisely to minimize environmental harm and secure long-term food production.

However, ethical food does not stop at the field. It moves along the supply chain, demanding transparency and fairness at every step. Barrientos & Dolan (2006) remind us that ethical sourcing and supply chain ethics mean that every stakeholder is treated with respect and fairness, ensuring that workers receive fair wages and that consumers can trust the origins of their food.

Ethical food also involves us as consumers. Despite widespread support for ethical practices, there often exists a disconnect between what people say and the choices they make at the checkout. This "attitude–behavior gap," documented by Beciu et al. (2024), illustrates that even when consumers express a desire to support sustainable and humane practices, everyday factors like price and convenience can lead them to make different choices. It's a reminder that ethical consumption requires not just awareness, but also accessible and affordable options.

Finally, the narrative of ethical food is completed by the role of policy and governance. Effective public policy can transform ethical ideals into reality by integrating these values into food regulations and labeling standards. As argued by Miller &Thomas (2020) and Mepham (2000), when governments enforce policies that protect vulnerable populations and promote

sustainability, they lay the groundwork for a food system that upholds fairness from production to consumption.

In sum, ethical food weaves together production ethics, supply chain integrity, consumer behavior, and robust governance into a cohesive story of striving for sustainability, fairness, and transparency at every step of the food journey.

Key components and challenges of Ethical Food

1. Sustainability and Environmental Impact

Sustainability is one of the cornerstones of ethical food. Scholars such as Beciu et al. (2024) emphasize that ethical food consumption has increasingly focused on production systems that reduce ecological footprints. In this context, shorter supply chains and localized food systems—highlighted by Kaiser et al. (2021)—offer promising alternatives by reducing carbon emissions and increasing resilience against global disruptions. In addition, contemporary research often discusses the concept of "food miles" and advocates for systems that promote seasonal and locally sourced foods as a means to protect biodiversity and reduce waste.

Challenge:

The global food industry is a significant contributor to environmental degradation, including deforestation, soil depletion, and greenhouse gas emissions. Livestock farming alone accounts for nearly 15% of global emissions, with beef production being one of the most resource-intensive sectors. Overfishing and monoculture farming practices also contribute to biodiversity loss and ecosystem damage.

Implications:

- **For consumers:** Ethical food choices, such as plant-based diets, organic products, and sustainably sourced seafood, can reduce environmental impact. However, these options are often more expensive, limiting accessibility for lower-income groups.
- **For businesses:** Companies face increasing pressure to adopt sustainable practices, such as reducing packaging waste, sourcing from regenerative farms, and lowering carbon footprints. Failure to do so can result in reputational damage and loss of consumer trust.
- **For policymakers:** Governments must balance food security with environmental concerns by promoting policies that support sustainable agriculture, such as subsidies for organic farming and regulations on carbon emissions from food production.

Solutions:

- Encouraging carbon labeling on food products to inform consumers about their environmental impact.

- Supporting local food systems to reduce transportation emissions.
- Promoting agroecological practices that enhance soil health and biodiversity.

2. Animal Welfare and Ethical Sourcing

Animal welfare remains a critical issue within ethical food debates. Sandler (2023) and Thompson (as noted in his work on ethical issues in the food industry) scrutinize practices in the meat industry, challenging methods that compromise animal welfare for higher production efficiency. Ethical sourcing, as detailed in the edited volume by Barrientos & Dolan (2006), extends these concerns to the entire supply chain. This includes ensuring that labor conditions are fair and that producers receive equitable returns. Such practices are seen as essential for fostering trust and building a sustainable global food network.

Challenge:

Industrial farming practices often prioritize efficiency and cost reduction over animal welfare, leading to overcrowded conditions, routine antibiotic use, and inhumane treatment of livestock. The growing demand for meat and dairy has intensified factory farming, raising ethical concerns.

Implications:

- **For consumers:** There is increasing demand for cruelty-free and free-range animal products. However, ethical animal farming can be more expensive, and consumers may struggle to distinguish between genuinely humane practices and misleading marketing claims (e.g., "cage-free" vs. "free-range").
- **For businesses:** Companies that prioritize animal welfare can differentiate themselves in the market, but ethical farming practices often involve higher production costs. Some businesses engage in "humane washing," where they falsely market products as ethical to attract conscious consumers.
- **For policymakers:** Governments face the challenge of enforcing stricter animal welfare regulations without significantly raising food prices or harming farmers' profitability.

Solutions:

- Implementing standardized animal welfare certifications to reduce consumer confusion.
- Increasing transparency in supply chains so consumers can verify ethical claims.
- Encouraging plant-based and lab-grown meat alternatives as a sustainable solution.

3. Social Justice, Food Insecurity, and Equity

The ethical dimensions of food extend into the realm of social justice and human rights. Miller and Thomas (2020) argue that food policies should not only focus on efficiency but must also

address issues of food insecurity and inequality. Their work on food and nutrition assistance programs demonstrates that an ethical approach to governance involves ensuring access to healthy food for all segments of society. In addition, broader discussions incorporate the concept of food sovereignty—empowering local communities to control their food systems—as a pathway to achieving both social justice and economic resilience.

Challenge:

While ethical food choices are important, food security remains a critical issue. Many ethical food options, such as organic and fair-trade products, are more expensive and less accessible to lower-income populations. Meanwhile, global hunger and food scarcity persist in many regions.

Implications:

- **For consumers:** Ethical food remains a privilege for many, as higher costs limit accessibility for lower-income families. Consumers in food-insecure regions may prioritize affordability and availability over ethical concerns.
- **For businesses:** Companies must balance ethical sourcing with affordability. There is growing interest in making organic and sustainable food accessible to a broader demographic.
- **For policymakers:** Governments must ensure that ethical food policies do not widen inequalities by making food more expensive. Subsidies for sustainable farming and fair-trade programs can help bridge the gap.

Solutions:

- Expanding food assistance programs to include ethically sourced options.
- Encouraging urban farming and local food production to improve access.
- Supporting ethical food initiatives in low-income communities.

4. **Fair Trade & Labor Rights**

Fair Trade and labor rights represent a formidable challenge within the ethical food movement. In a global food system marked by extensive supply chains and intense market pressures, ensuring that every worker—from small-scale farmers to factory laborers—receives fair compensation and operates in safe conditions is both a moral imperative and a complex logistical hurdle. In many regions, exploitation remains a harsh reality, with workers facing low wages, unsafe environments, and a lack of legal protection, which undermines the very ethos of ethical consumption. As Barrientos & Dolan (2006) highlight, fair trade initiatives aim to rectify these inequities by fostering transparent and equitable practices across the supply chain. Yet, the transition to fair trade is hindered by entrenched practices

and economic imperatives that often prioritize cost reduction over human dignity. Ultimately, overcoming these challenges is critical for building a food system that truly reflects the principles of fairness and social justice.

Challenge:

Food production often involves exploitative labor practices, particularly in developing countries where workers are subjected to low wages, unsafe working conditions, and lack of job security.

Implications:

- **For consumers:** Ethical certifications such as Fair Trade and Rainforest Alliance help consumers identify products that support fair labor practices. However, many consumers remain unaware of labor exploitation in food supply chains or assume that all products sold in supermarkets meet ethical standards.

- **For businesses:** Companies that fail to ensure fair wages and working conditions for farmers and laborers face growing scrutiny from advocacy groups and ethical consumers. Ethical sourcing is becoming a competitive advantage in the market.

- **For policymakers:** Governments need to strengthen labor protections, enforce fair trade regulations, and support small-scale farmers through better access to resources and markets.

Solutions:

- Strengthening fair trade certification processes to include better monitoring of supply chains.

- Educating consumers about the social impact of their purchasing choices.

- Providing financial incentives for companies that ensure ethical labor practices.

5. **Consumer Misinformation & Labeling**

Consumer misinformation and ambiguous labeling pose significant challenges for the ethical food movement. Many products on the market are marketed with buzzwords like "organic," "sustainable," or "cage-free" without clear, standardized definitions or rigorous verification processes. This ambiguity often leads to greenwashing, where companies exaggerate or misrepresent the ethical attributes of their products, ultimately eroding consumer trust. Without reliable information, consumers struggle to differentiate genuinely ethical products from those that merely capitalize on the trend, resulting in decisions that may unintentionally support less ethical practices. This challenge underscores the critical need for robust regulatory frameworks and improved transparency in labeling, ensuring that ethical claims are backed by verifiable standards and clear communication.

Challenge:

Many food products are marketed as "ethical" or "sustainable" without clear verification, leading to consumer confusion. Terms like "natural," "cage-free," and "green" are often used misleadingly without regulatory oversight. This weakens consumer trust and makes it difficult to distinguish genuinely ethical products.

Implications:

- **For consumers:** Misinformation makes it harder for ethical consumers to make informed choices. Many rely on brand reputation rather than verified certifications, which can lead to unintentional support of unethical practices.
- **For businesses:** Companies that engage in greenwashing—falsely advertising their products as ethical—risk backlash when consumers discover misleading claims. Ethical brands, on the other hand, must work harder to differentiate themselves from deceptive competitors.
- **For policymakers:** Regulators struggle to keep up with misleading claims and must implement stricter standards for food labeling and corporate transparency.

Solutions:

- Strengthening government regulations on food labeling to prevent misleading claims.
- Increasing consumer education about what different certifications mean.
- Encouraging digital transparency, such as QR codes on packaging that allow consumers to trace a product's ethical credentials.

Policy Implications and the Role of Governance

Policy plays a pivotal role in operationalizing ethical principles within the food system. Several key areas have emerged in literature:

- **Regulatory Standards and Food Labeling:** Mepham (2000) argues for the incorporation of ethical criteria into food safety and labeling standards. Transparent labels that provide information on production methods and sourcing practices empower consumers to make informed choices.
- **Food Assistance Programs:** Miller and Thomas (2020) demonstrate that ethical reforms in programs can help bridge the gap between food insecurity and social justice. These programs should be designed with principles of equity and dignity in mind, ensuring that vulnerable populations have consistent access to nutritious food.
- **Participatory Policy-Making:** Kaiser et al. (2021) advocate for grassroots involvement and deliberative democracy in the formulation of food policies. Such processes enable

diverse stakeholders—ranging from local communities to multinational corporations—to contribute to a shared vision for a sustainable and ethical food system.

- **Global Governance and Trade:** The global nature of food systems necessitates international cooperation. Ethical food policies must reconcile local needs with global trade regulations, ensuring that the benefits of international commerce do not come at the expense of ethical considerations such as labor rights and environmental protection.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The empirical findings from the Albanian consumer survey extend the insights derived from the broader literature on ethical food. They demonstrate that although awareness of ethical food production is relatively high, significant challenges remain in translating this awareness into consistent purchasing behavior. Price sensitivity and limited access to verified ethical products contribute to the observed gap between consumer ideals and actual market behavior.

Figure 1. Awareness of Ethical Food Production
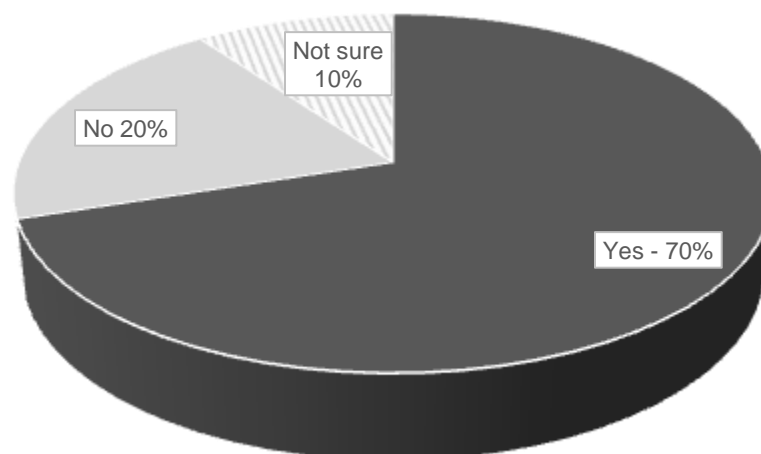
A significant proportion of Albanian consumers reported being aware of ethical food production. Figure 1 illustrates that 70% of respondents are aware of ethical food production, 20% are not, and 10% are unsure. This high level of awareness sets a foundation for exploring deeper perceptions. Social media is the leading source of information (40%), followed by traditional media (25%) (Figure 2). This finding underscores the importance of digital platforms in shaping ethical food perceptions and the need for accurate digital content.

Figure 2: Sources of Information on Ethical Food Production
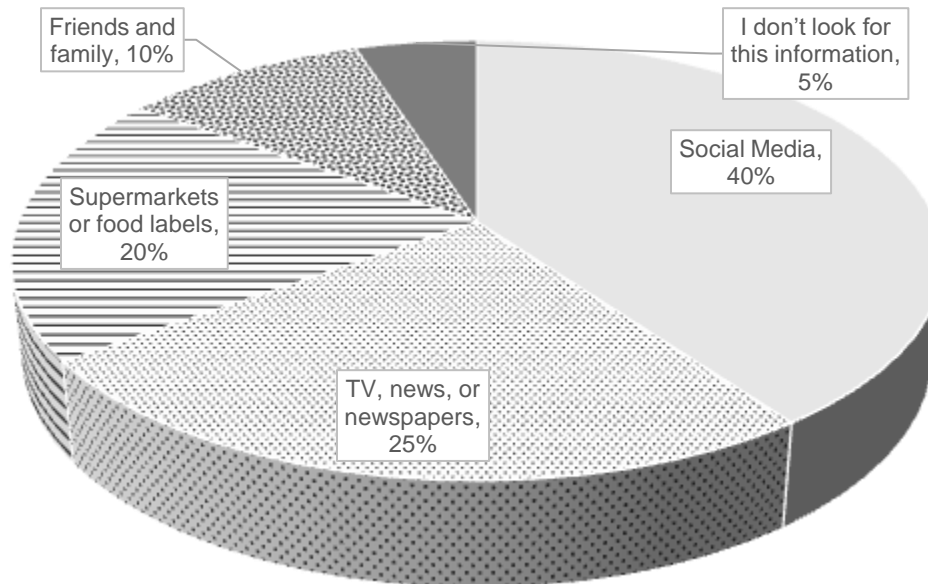
Albanian consumers' focus on both social and environmental factors while defining ethical food production. Fair wages, sustainable farming, and equal treatment are the top components associated with it (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Key elements Associated with Ethical Food Production*

Note: * Respondents could choose up to three elements that best describe ethical food production

Participants were also asked how important environmental protection is when choosing food and which environmental issues concern them most. 80% of respondents consider

environmental protection very important when choosing food, indicating strong consumer support for sustainable practices. Additionally, when asked about the main environmental problems raised when not considering environmental protection by food sector operators, their responses were as follows:

- 70% concerned about pesticide and chemical use,
- 50% about deforestation,
- 45% of water pollution,
- 30% of food waste.

Figure 4. Perceptions of Animal Welfare
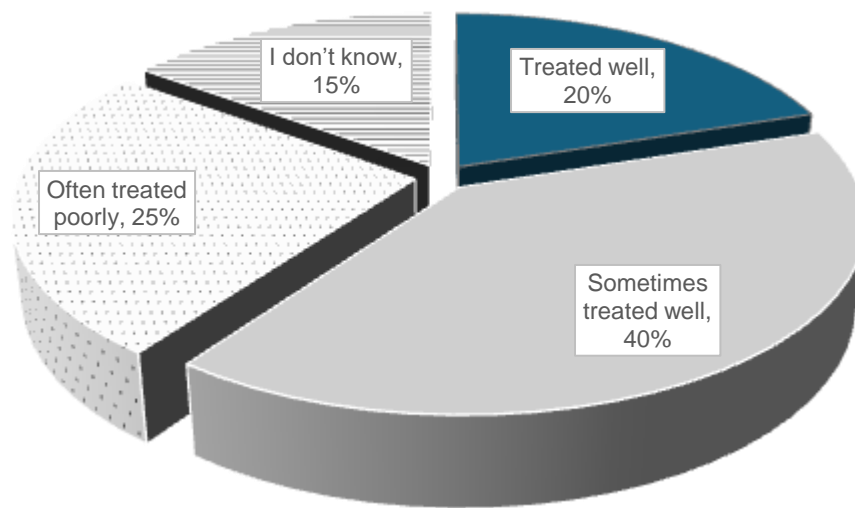
Animal welfare perceptions are critical in the ethical food debate. Responses indicated varied opinions regarding the treatment of animals. 40% feel animals are treated reasonably well, while 25% express concern over poor treatment, and 15% are unsure (Figure 4). Mixed responses highlight ongoing concerns, with significant portions of respondents expressing uncertainty or dissatisfaction with current practices. This suggests a need for clearer ethical practices in animal rearing.

Fair trade is another area of focus. Respondents shared their views on whether small farmers are paid fairly. 45% of respondents perceive fair trade outcomes as inconsistent, while only 30% believe that farmers are fairly paid (Figure 5). This reflects significant consumer concern regarding labor rights and fair compensation. Additionally, 70% reported having seen Fair Trade or Organic labels, and 55% stated they would pay more if they knew farmers were paid fairly.

Figure 5. Perceptions on Fair Trade
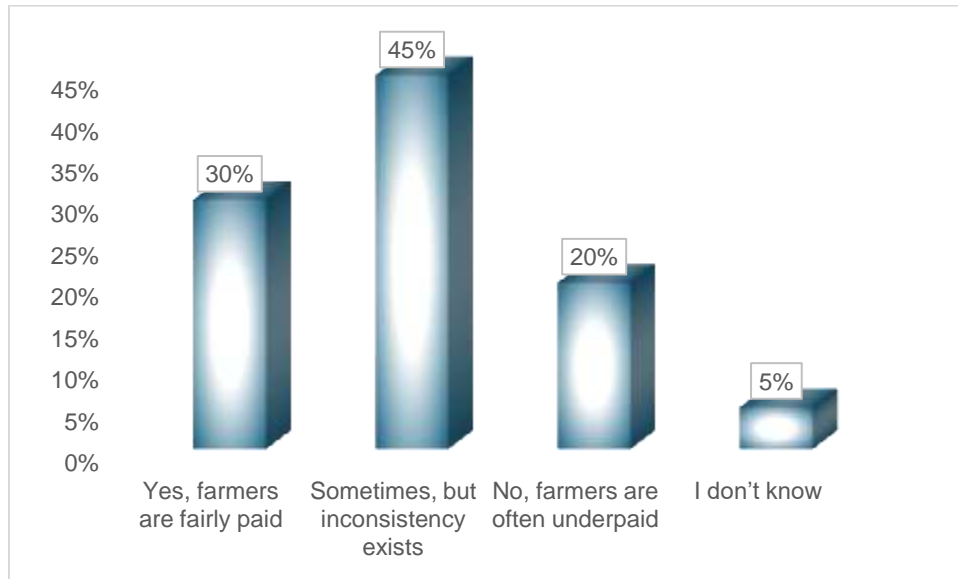
When asked about learning more and factors that would encourage ethical consumption, the data reveal that there is a strong desire among consumers to learn more about ethical food production, and clearer labeling is seen as a critical factor in guiding purchasing decisions (Table 1).

Table 1: Consumer Engagement and Future Choices

Question/Option	Frequency	Percentage
Would like to learn more about food production	180	60%
Interested in clear, reliable labels	150	50%
Prefer more ethical products in supermarkets	135	45%
Influence of government support on ethical farming	90	30%
Believe responsibility lies with farmers/producers	120	40%
Believe government and policymakers hold the main responsibility	105	35%

To sum up by thematic areas, the survey results revealed that:

1. **Awareness of Ethical Food Production:** Although many respondents recognized the importance of issues such as fair wages, environmental protection, and animal welfare, there remains ambiguity about the exact meaning of "ethical food." This finding aligns with earlier research (Beciu et al., 2024) that documents the persistent "attitude–behavior gap" in ethical consumption.

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2. **Perceptions of Sustainability and Environmental Impact:** Respondents expressed strong support for sustainable agricultural practices. They identified reducing greenhouse gas emissions and minimizing waste as key priorities. Many participants favored locally sourced and seasonal products, corroborating Kaiser et al. (2021), who advocate for shorter supply chains to enhance both sustainability and food system resilience.

3. **Labor Rights and Fair Trade:** Most survey participants believed that food workers, particularly in lower-income contexts, often experience unfair labor conditions. Consistent with findings by Barrientos & Dolan (2006), respondents highlighted that fair trade certifications could be a useful signal of ethical sourcing. However, a considerable number also indicated that high ethical standards are often accompanied by higher costs, limiting accessibility for many consumers.

4. **Animal Welfare Concerns:** Consumer opinions on animal welfare were mixed. While there was significant concern over industrial farming practices, many respondents expressed confusion regarding various labeling terms (e.g., "cage-free" vs. "free-range"). This reflects the challenges identified by Sandler (2023) and Thompson, where ethical claims in the meat industry require greater transparency to build consumer trust.

5. **Misinformation and Labeling:** The survey underscored a prevalent issue of consumer misinformation, with many respondents admitting that marketing and ambiguous labeling make it difficult to discern genuinely ethical products. This result supports calls in the literature (Mepham, 2000) for improved regulatory standards to ensure accurate and clear information is available on food packaging.

CONCLUSIONS

This study demonstrates that ethical food is a complex, multidimensional construct that intersects environmental sustainability, social justice, animal welfare, and consumer transparency. Our findings indicate that while Albanian consumers are generally aware of the importance of ethical food production, there exists a significant "attitude–behavior gap" where stated preferences for sustainable and fair practices often do not result in corresponding purchasing decisions. The challenges identified include high production costs, ambiguous and misleading labeling, and inadequate regulatory frameworks. Consumers frequently encounter confusion over terms such as "organic," "sustainable," and "cage-free," which undermines their ability to make informed decisions and inadvertently supports less ethical practices. Furthermore, issues such as exploitative labor conditions and industrial animal farming practices continue to persist, exacerbated by global market pressures and limited enforcement of fair-

trade standards. Overall, the study underscores that addressing these challenges requires a concerted, interdisciplinary effort that spans policy reform, industry accountability, and consumer education, ensuring that ethical food practices move from niche markets to mainstream norms.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The findings of this study have to be seen in light of some limitations such as limited geographic scope, lack of detailed demographics, focus solely on consumers and descriptive statistics, which could be addressed in future research:

- The study focuses only on consumers in urban Tirana, which may not capture views from rural or other regional populations. The sample might not fully represent the diversity of Albanian consumers.
- This article does not provide a demographic breakdown, in order to see how social-demographic variables like age, income, or education levels might influence ethical food perceptions.
- It examines only consumer views and does not incorporate insights from other stakeholders like producers, retailers, or policymakers.
- The analysis mainly uses descriptive statistics, which limits the ability to draw conclusions about cause and effect.

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