Consumers' perceptions and policy implications towards the future of the Organic Food Sector in Italy

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Abstract

Research on organic consumers' preferences has been given a lot of attention in the past, analysing in detail the motives of organic food consumption across the World. However, less attention has been paid to the expectations of consumers change in the context of growing complexities of sustainable agriculture and competing discourses of numerous food movements. The main goal of this study is to explore how the ongoing changes of the organic sector are reflected in consumers' perspectives of organic agriculture and their preferences for organic food quality. The study was conducted in Italy with the use of the Q-methodology with a Q-set of 44 statements and a P-set of 20 participants. Three main groups of consumers were identified for the purposes of the study: "Mainstreaming for the better good", "Critical supporters looking for more", "Organic intensification supporters". Despite each ideal-typical group showing different perceptions of the future of the organic movement, they all shared similar policy implications. Three main topics of discussion emerged from the results of this study which are: the expectations of the consumers towards the future of the organic movement, the role of trust in purchasing behaviors and the importance of supporting rural development.

Keywords*: Organic 3.0, Q-methodology, Organic movement, Local food, Policy implication.*

1. Introduction

The global organic movement is currently looking for its new strategic course. An important contribution to this debate has been provided by the framework Organic 3.0 (Arbenz *et al.*, 2017), created by IFOAM - Organics International as the new development of the organic sector. As Arbenz *et al.* (2017) show, the pioneer movement (Organic 1.0) is in continuing development: from the standard and certification phase (Organic 2.0) which created trust among consumers and policymakers (Huber *et al.*, 2015), guaranteeing the growth of the organic practices and consumption, the organic 3.0 aims for a paradigm shift. The new model proposed by IFOAM follow seven features that rotate around the idea of cultural innovation, transparency and integrity, wider sustainability interests, empowerments of the actors of the food system and true value cost accounting (Arbenz *et al.*,

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2017). One of the keys, and often neglected, questions in this debate, is how are changes in the course of the organic movement reflected by consumers themselves?

Research on organic consumers' preferences has been given a lot of attention in the past. Those studies explored and tested in detail the motives of organic food consumption across the World (Vindigni *et al.*, 2002; Aertsens *et al.*, 2009; Thøgersen, 2010; Feldmann and Hamm, 2015; Azzurra *et al.*, 2019). The relevance of the subject has been proven by Hemmerling *et al.* (2015) which showed a strong rise in studies regarding organic consumption from 2000 till now. However, less attention has been paid to the expectations of consumers change in the context of growing complexities of sustainable agriculture and competing discourses of numerous food movements, which are also referred to in the Organic 3.0 concept.

The aim of this study is to explore how consumers modify their approaches to organic food with respect to the changing strategy of the organic movement. But more specifically, we want to find out how organic consumers view successes and insufficiencies of the current organic movement model, and how they expect organic agriculture to change, in order to improve sustainability of food production. To achieve this goal, the authors selected Italy as their context of the study.

2. Literature review

The Italian organic movement started to spread in the 1970s as an alternative network that wanted to reconnect farmers with consumers under greener, cleaner and more fair agricultural methods (Brunori *et al.*, 2013). The growth of this movement had to cope with strong regional disparities caused by the politics of decentralization that the national government implemented throughout the years, which transferred the agricultural policy competences to local governments. Thus, financial support, growth of organic farmers associations and organic farms, have always depended on uneven promotion of this sector from the regional authorities (Darnhofer *et al.*, 2019; Compagnoni *et al.*, 2000; Defrancesco and Rossetto, 2007). These disparities are also reflected in consumption which mostly occurs in the wealthier northern regions even though production is mainly located in the south of the country (Gracia and De Magistris, 2008; Compagnoni *et al.*, 2000; Defrancesco and Rossetto, 2007).

Despite these reactive rather than proactive governmental measures (Darnhofer *et al.*, 2019), today Italy is one of the largest producers of organic food worldwide. The growth in supply and demand, along with the strong support of mainstream farmers' associations (such as Coldiretti), lead the spread of organic products in supermarkets and GDO (Darnhofer *et al.*, 2019; Defrancesco and Rossetto, 2007). In fact, the Italian organic food sector no longer remains a niche market but shifted into the mainstream, becoming available to a larger group of consumers (Defrancesco and Rossetto, 2007; Darnhofer *et al.*, 2019). This shift was endorsed by a general narrative of the Italian food politics which focuses on local, traditional, artisanal as safer, fresher and cleaner: the so called "quality turn" (Brunori *et al.*, 2013). For these reasons, the majority of Italians buy organic products in combination with conventional ones and only a few percentages buy organic food solely (Pellegrini and Farinello, 2009; Rete Rurale Nazionale, 2018; Compagnoni *et al.*, 2000).

Just like organic consumers in other countries, Italians' have a good awareness and knowledge of the link between food consumption and personal health (Annunziata and Pascale, 2009; Annunziata and Vecchio, 2016; Annunziata *et al.*, 2011; Pellegrini and Farinello, 2009; Chinnici *et al.*, 2002; Defrancesco and Rossetto, 2007; Hemmerling *et al.*, 2015). This approach is not only related to the absence of specific substances, such as pesticides or additives, but also in the perception of freshness and natural production methods (Annunziata and Pascale, 2009). Additionally, caring about the environment and the ethical aspects of food production is part of the consumers' drivers to buy organic food (Pellegrini and Farinello, 2009; Cicia *et al.*, 2002; Chinnici *et al.*, 2002; Zanoli *et al.*, 2013; Hemmerling *et al.*, 2015; Karelakis *et al.*, 2018). As demonstrated also by Karelakis *et al.* (2018), personal values are often an important component of the organic choice. Although Italian or-

ganic consumers trust labelling as an important feature to distinguish production systems, as confirmed by Troiano *et al.* (2016) study, consumers ask for more detailed information, especially related to the environment, ethics and health (Annunziata *at al.*, 2011; De Magistris and Gracia Royo, 2012; Rete Rurale Nazionale, 2018; Canavari, 2007). However, scepticism towards labelling can be attributed to the general mistrust of institutions, typical of Italians' mindset or to a low level of communication regarding new policies and strategies adopted by governments (Canavari, 2007).

The strong link between organic and health/sustainable considerations are, however, overruled by taste and pleasure which are always considered very important food characteristics (Annunziata and Pascale, 2009; Annunziata and Vecchio, 2016; Pellegrini and Farinello, 2009). "Although consumers often claim to purchase organic food out of altruistic motives that have a public utility, such as environmental protection, in practice, attributes representing an individual utility (e.g. health, taste and quality) are the stronger driving forces for organic food consumption" (Hemmerling *et al.*, 2015, p. 25). Because of the "quality turn" (Goodman, 2004; Brunori *et al.*, 2013) earlier mentioned, those characteristics (e.g. taste, pleasure, health etc.) are strongly related to local and traditional products in Italy (Hemmerling *et al.*, 2013). In fact, the origin of production is the first proxy for quality, in particular when talking about local and regional production (Annunziata and Vecchio, 2016; Cicia *et al.*, 2002; Hemmerling *et al.*, 2013; Rete Rurale Nazionale, 2018; Darnhofer *et al.*, 2019; Jorge *et al.*, 2020). In Troiano *et al.* study (2016), for instance, local claims prevail on organic labelling when it comes to purchasing influence of wine: "quality is more linked to the local claims and therefore organic labels seem to be a not sufficient condition to guarantee the perceived quality of a certain wine" (p. 19). In fact, as confirmed by Hemmerling *et al.* (2015) tradition or origin is often more important than an organic certification. In particular, often the term local has been associated with natural attributes in food, as confirmed by Jorge *et al.* (2020) which states that "local" has a strong influence in the intention of eating healthier among millennials.

3. Materials and methods

The empirical study is based on the application of the Q-method. This method – which combines an interpretative approach with a statistical rigour – is intended for social discourse analysis (Stephenson, 1936; Stephenson, 1953). The method has been recently applied in various contexts including agriculture (Previte *et al.*, 2007; Hall, 2008; Zagata, 2010; Nicholas *et al.*, 2014; Mandolesi *et al.*, 2015; Iofrida *et al.*, 2018; Zanoli *et al.*, 2018) and consumers studies (e.g. Kraak *et al.*, 2014; Zhang and Beyouncef, 2016; Yarar and Orth, 2018).

The application of the Q-method is concisely presented in the points below that inform in detail about our steps and also about the specific parameters of our empirical study. The design of our study follows guidelines provided in seminal literature for Q-methodology (Brown, 1980; Brown, 1993; Barry and Proops, 2000).

3.1. *Mapping of the social discourse*

Our empirical inquiry started with the exploration of the communication concourse of the organic sector in Europe. Based on the study of documents, there were approximately 300 arguments and statements identified, which reflected the ongoing debate on organic agriculture in Europe. The main attention was given to strategic documents, discussion papers, policy documents, research reports which represented different viewpoints of stakeholders active in the organic sector. We have systematically explored public documents on the EU level and particularly within the national context of Italy. Additionally, we have explored communication concourse related to the situation in Great Britain, Portugal, Austria and Czech Republic. Such a sample of countries enabled us to look at diverse realities of organic sectors in Europe – with respect to the main goal of the q-methodology – to identify inner structures represented by latent discourses within a communication concourse (Addams, 2000).

3.2. *Selection of the stimuli (Q-set)*

In order to systematically organise a large number of quotes from the documents, the pool of the statements was categorized into four thematic groups related to (1) agriculture, (2) food production, (3) organic movement and (4) organic policy. The first step was to exclude any duplicate and unclear statements from the pool. In the second step, we looked for statements that explicitly addressed current challenges of the organic sector and possible changes in strategic course. At the same time, we aimed to create a balanced sample that would proportionally cover the four basic themes. The final sample (Q-set) consists of 44 statements (see the Table 4).

3.3. *Sorting grid*

A standard scale with quasi-normal distribution was selected, reaching from +5 to -5. The scale was printed out on a large paper to allow respondents to place the statements directly on the sorting grid (Figure 1).

3.4. *Sample (P-set)*

Sample of the respondents was created with the use of the strategic sampling (Watts and Stenner, 2005) and counted 20 participants, who represented different groups of organic consumers with a different level of experience and knowledge about organic agriculture. The Q-methodology has been selected as it allows the use of small number of respondents (Previte *et al*., 2007), which was the case of this study. In fact, as confirmed by many studies (Brown, 1996; Watts and Stenner, 2005; Previte *et al*., 2007), Q studies can be carried out with very few participants and still be considered highly effective. Hence, the participants were recruited via social networks with respect to two conditions: participants had to be responsible for food purchases in their household and buy at least two types of organic products (available options: dairy products, meat, vegetables/fruit, bakery) on a frequent basis (monthly or more). These conditions have been checked with filter questions prior to sorting of the statements. The selected participants resulted in 75% women and an equal number of participants under and over 30 years old, as described in Table 1.

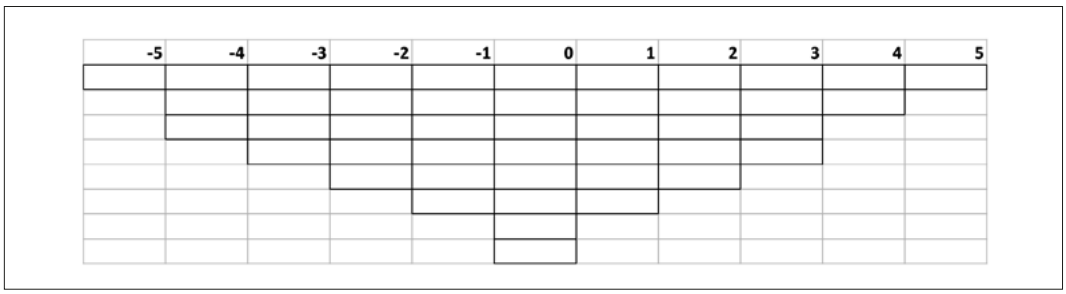
Table 1 - Demographics of the participants.

Participants	*20*
Woman	15
Men	5
Less than 30 years old	10
More than 30 years old	10

3.5. *Data collection*

Participants were asked to place the statements on the evaluation scale based on their subjective opinion. The condition of instruction was framed by the question (written above the sorting grid): "Can you value on a scale from -5 to +5 your agreement or disagreement on the following statements?". Right after the sorting, an in-depth interview to elucidate the participants chosen sorting of the statements. The interviews validated the sorting grids results and added some important details for better understanding those results, for instance, the personal motives and habits of purchasing choices.

Figure 1 - Sorting grid prototype.



3.6. *Analysis*

We have calculated a basic descriptive statistic and, after a preliminary check for errors, we processed the data with the application *qmethod package for R* (Zabala, 2020). Although original studies in Q-methodology used for extracting factors centroid factor analysis (Brown, 1980), other extraction methods, such as factor analysis or PCA, are also accepted in Q-methodology studies, since both methods of extraction generate very similar results (Watts and Stenner, 2005). For pragmatic reasons the *qmethod package* relies on the PCA method only (Zabala, 2020, p. 41) and therefore this extraction method was used also in our analysis. Table 2 shows the factor loadings of the extracted factors.

Factors were extracted through the PCA method with the following varimax rotation method. Decision about the number of factors was based on substantial and statistical criteria, i.e. interpretability of factors, eigen values of factors and their coefficients of reliability (see the Table 2 for details). We have opted for a 3-factor solution that has matched the above-mentioned combination of criteria.

Table 2 - General factor characteristics.

	F1	*F2*	*F3*
Number of loadings	6	7	4
Eigenvalues	4.24	3.65	2.81
Explained variance (%)	21.22	18.23	14.04
Reliability	0.96	0.97	0.94
Standard error f-scores	0.20	0.19	0.24

Table 3 - Factor loadings of the extracted factors.

	F1	*F2*	*F3*
X2	0.518	0.272	0.433
X9	0.631	0.378	0.385
X12	0.638	0.416	0.140
X13	0.769	0.231	0.263
X14	0.787	0.097	0.263
X15	0.765	0.044	0.182
X1	0.040	0.730	0.425
X3	0.364	0.596	-0.430
X6	0.264	0.640	0.152
X8	0.318	0.565	0.228
X10	0.310	0.509	-0.073
X17	-0.073	0.772	0.119
X20	0.456	0.487	0.142
X4	0.439	-0.168	0.526
X5	-0.169	0.466	0.657
X11	0.296	0.032	0.419
X16	0.164	0.099	0.776
X18	0.433	0.370	0.241
X19	0.473	0.285	0.541
X7	0.112	0.084	0.180

4. Results

From the Q-analysis three main factors were extracted, which cumulatively explain 53.48% of the total variance within the data. Following the Q-methodology, each factor aims to represent a group ideal-type viewpoint of organic consumers and their distinct views on the organic sector (Table 2). The interpretation of the data, which will be explained in this section, focuses on statements with the highest dis/agreement, as those are the statements that reflect the viewpoints of the consumers, and the viewpoints that discern differences between the groups (Table 3). After a brief description of the three main factors extracted, an analysis of consensus statements is presented. Confounded statements, which are those that load significantly on more than one factor, are mostly treated in section of consensus statements, or simply ignored if their score was low, as they risk making the factors array less distinct (Armatas *et al.*, 2014). The appendix attached to the article better explains the statistical significance of the statements by showing the consensus and distinguishing ones for each factor.

Factor 1: Mainstreaming for the better good

The first discourse is characterised by a strong support for organic production which should be more prioritized by institutions as a healthier and more sustainable method that should consequently be widely available for all. Communication towards the consumer is one of the main concerns (1, +3; 4, +5[1]) as the label is intended

[1] In this section, the statement number is cited with the respective factor score.

to inform about absence of fertilizers, pesticides and GMO, which strongly differentiates organic from conventional (38, -4). Indeed, this group of consumers believes in organic production as a healthier option (26, -3; 35, -3) that not only helps farmers in rural areas (34, -5) but also could provide a safety net to food security issues on a global scale (16, +4; 3, -4). For this reason, the need to mainstream organic products into all public facilities such as school canteens, hospitals etc. is one of the statements with the most agreement (16, +4). It is interesting to notice that this discourse in our analysis is mainly shared by mothers between 26 and 64 years old. For instance, during one of the post-sorting interviews, a participant included in this factor talked at length about the importance of organic foods in school public procurements and the role that teachers have in educating students about sustainable diets and healthy nutrition. The fact that this perspective is supported by women with children strongly influences the answers which are all directed to what can be called *the better good*. In this view, organic and conventional systems should overcome their differences (8, +3) in order to build a more ecological (33, +3) and healthier world for future generations. As all types of agricultural production are subject to climate change and market variability (30, -3; 40, -3), institutions and agricultural subsidies should focus on organic as a more environmentally friendly, economically fair and healthier method (24, +3; 33, +3; 2, +4).

Factor 2: Critical supporters looking for more

The second factor is composed by a mixed group of young men and women between 23 and 33 years old, mainly single and without children. This viewpoint believes in the need of a strong political intervention regarding sustainability policies, refusing the idea that consumers should lead the sector (2, +5; 42, -5). The focus here is less on organic specifically but more generally on the impact that massive food production has on human health and the environment, as its "true cost" is not integrated in the price of products (14, +4; 2, +5). According to this discourse, the production method strongly influences the environment and human health (39, +4; 2, +5; 14, +4) and therefore a better communication towards consumers should be pursued (1, +3; 4, +3; 37, +3). However, in opposition to this first factor, this view strongly disagrees on the mainstreaming of organic agriculture as it will not provide food security to the European population (20, -4; 6, -3). There is, in fact, the implicit idea that by becoming more mainstream organic will impact as much as conventional agriculture. Organic is viewed as questionable as many other types of food production (40, -4), which is *not enough* to make the sustainable transition. While not denying the qualities, this factor critically supports organic production, implicitly suggesting that more could be done. This argument was mentioned during the interviews. One of the consumers said he "expects more" from organic agriculture. During the post-sorting interviews, these consumers showed the propensity to distinguish organic from local, regional from local, products bought in local markets – either organic or not – from the ones from supermarkets. Many participants shared the viewpoint that organic was being overtaken by the alternative food movement initiatives flourishing in their local areas, which are often considered to be more sustainable because they are less related to the dynamics of conventional production. In this perspective, trust in producers and local products was a big part of the consumption pattern. Hence, organic does not have to learn from conventional (44, -3), does not have to become more productive (20, -4) although new voices and other sustainable initiatives, should be part of the political decisions (27, +3).

Factor 3: Organic intensification supporters

The last viewpoint is very heterogeneous: it includes mainly women but also men, mainly born in the 1960 as well as few younger consumers with or without children. According to this discourse, organic production should be mainstreamed on a global scale (19, +4), become a priority for institutions (24, +4) and intensify its production in order to change the conventional system (10, +3) as organic products are more healthy and environmentally friendly (39, +5; 35, -5; 32 -3). By intensifying the production, organic could solve global food system issues (10, +3),

Table 4 - Statements and factor array for each perspective.

Nr.	*Statement*	*F1*	*F2*	*F3*
1	Organic farming and food sector needs to improve communication towards consumers	3	3	2
2	The future policy needs to take into account the true cost of industrial farming	4	5	0
3	Food security cannot be achieved with organic agriculture	-4	-1	1
4	Food products that have been produced using artificial fertilizers, chemical treatments or GMO should be clearly labelled	5	3	0
5	A more sustainable lifestyle is more costly for the consumer	1	-1	-3
6	Organic agriculture can provide more than enough nutrition for the entire European population	0	-3	1
7	The dependency on subsidies has a very negative effect on autonomy and stability of farms	1	1	-1
8	Ideological barriers between supporters and opponents of organic agriculture need to be overcome to pave the way for reaching higher sustainability	3	1	-1
9	Consumers have more trust in local production, as opposed to organic products, which are globally traded and whose origins and production is not always clear	2	1	-1
10	Organic production must continue to grow to change conventional systems, contributing to solving global problems	1	0	3
11	The controls on organic farms should be strengthened, eliminating any derogations	-1	1	-3
12	Regulations for organic farmers and producers must be simplified	1	0	1
13	Organic farming and the organic food sector are currently competing with other sustainability initiatives	-1	-3	-4
14	If ecological costs would be fully integrated into the price of the products, industrially produced food would be much more expensive	2	4	1
15	Higher prices for food could perhaps contribute to a higher appreciation of their value and resulting in less food waste	-2	2	1
16	Organic products should be widely available in hospital catering, schools canteens, green management and public areas	4	1	2
17	More people would choose seasonal, regional and organic food products if they had the financial option	1	-1	0
18	The organic movement should be more inclusive of other issues, such as social justice and food sovereignty	0	0	2
19	Organic farming needs to be adopted on a global scale	1	-1	4
20	Organic agriculture needs to be more productive	0	-4	0
21	Lack of information is a major factor which limits the uptake of organic methods in modern agriculture	0	0	0
22	Smart combinations of organic and conventional methods could contribute toward increases of sustainable farming in global agriculture	-1	-2	2
23	Financial subsidies provided by the EU are not available for small farms and this should be addressed directly	2	1	-1
24	Organic agriculture should become a priority within national and EU agricultural policies	3	0	4
25	Local food production is more important than organic-based food production	-2	2	-1
26	Organically produced food are not more nutritious	-3	2	-3
27	Small-scale producers and consumers should have a significant voice in the political decisions concerning food and agriculture	2	3	3
28	Organic farmers should be given more room to autonomously develop sustainable solutions	0	0	3
29	Agro-industry and mass animal production must be restricted and subsidies withdrawn	1	2	-2

Nr.	Statement	F1	F2	F3
30	Organic farms can better tolerate periods of drought and other extreme weather fluctuations	-3	-1	-3
31	One of organic agriculture's strengths is improved livestock welfare	0	-2	-1
32	Organic production requires too much land usage for minimal yield	-2	-2	-3
33	All subsidies for agriculture should be oriented much more towards protection of the environment and climate	3	2	2
34	Organic agriculture does not contribute to employment in rural areas	-5	-3	-4
35	There is no scientific proof to verify that organic food products are more healthy and environmentally friendly than conventionally produced food	-3	-2	-5
36	The increasingly present term of "regional" in opposition to "organic" creates confusion for consumers	-1	-2	0
37	Consumers need to have a greater understanding of the work involved in food production	-1	3	2
38	At present the gap between "conventional" and "organic" production has become smaller and the differences blurred	-4	-1	-2
39	The way we produce and consume our food has a big impact on our health	0	4	5
40	Organic farms can better adapt to volatile fluctuating market prices and climate change	-3	-4	0
41	Precision farming and digital technologies are necessary innovations that should be implemented in organic agriculture	-1	0	3
42	The support for organic agriculture should be provided mainly from the consumers' side	-2	-5	-2
43	Organic products are often imported and therefore are not necessarily environmentally friendly	0	0	-1
44	Organic farms can learn from conventional farms	-2	-3	0

giving consumers and farmers a louder voice in policy making (27, +3; 28, +3) and guaranteeing a fair sustainable lifestyle to all (5, -3). This idea of sustainable intensification is also supported by the role of technology, which was not highlighted in the other two factors. Indeed, members of this group believe in the need to apply modern agricultural technology to organic production (41, +3), along with a lighter control system and higher autonomy of organic farmers (11, -3; 28, +3). While the first factor supports organic as strongly different to conventional, here this distinction is blurred, and the support is focused on adapting organic agriculture to the conventional system. During one of the interviews, the participant declared "the more organic we have, the better it is".

Consensus statements

Some consensus statements have been highlighted, as those statements that gained similar or equal scores in all three factors. Indeed, most participants stated to have more trust in local production than organic products (9: +2, +1, -1[2]). This characteristic has been highlighted in the post-sorting interviews as well, where many participants, especially in Factor 2, confirmed that one of their main purchasing motives was trust in their local market or local shop, regardless of buying organic. Also, another consensual aspect regards the role of small producers and consumers in the political decision making (27: +2, +3, +3) which can still be related to the trust in local production and the affinity to farmers that Italians might have as a rural country. Again, environmental protection seems to be a very important pattern among all participants of the study, as all three factors support the protection of the environment and climate change as a focus of agricultural subsidies (33: +3, +2, +2). On the other hand, they showed a negative consensus regard-

[2] In this section, all three factor scores are showed for each statements cited. The sequence is F1, F2, F3.

ing land usage requirements for organic products (32: -2, -2, -3), showing an interesting insight on consumers' knowledge. Finally, there is a neutral consensus regarding simplification of regulations (12: +1, 0, +1), lack of information as a limit to modern agricultural growth (21: 0, 0, 0) and the role of imported organic food as less environmentally friendly (43: 0, 0, -1), which all show a good understanding of the trust in organic methods and certification. It is important to highlight that the trust in certification system shown by the results often do not constitute a real understanding of what the organic certification is. This was confirmed by the interviews with participants where the trust mentioned was often related to trust in *a* certification rather than on the organic certification itself. Same regarding the use of terms such as "local", "natural", "plant-based", "sustainable". The study recognized that these terms are often used as interchangeable without understanding the nuanced differences.

5 Discussion

This study aimed at understanding the impact of the evolvements of the organic movement on organic food purchasing behaviours. Other studies already showed that personal health (Annunziata and Pascale, 2009; Annunziata and Vecchio, 2016; Annunziata *et al.*, 2011; Pellegrini and Farinello, 2009; Chinnici *et al.*, 2002; Defrancesco and Rossetto, 2007; Hemmerling *et al.*, 2015) along with environmental and ethical aspects of food production (Pellegrini and Farinello, 2009; Cicia *et al.*, 2002; Chinnici *et al.*, 2002; Zanoli *et al.*, 2013; Hemmerling *et al.*, 2015; Karelakis *et al.*, 2018) are important purchasing drivers. This research adds on this field of study by commenting on the perceptions of how the organic movement has been changing and how does this impact on purchasing choices. Hence the study aimed to answer to the following question: how are changes in the course of the organic movement reflected by consumers themselves?

To answer this question, three main topics of discussion emerged from the results of this study:

- Expectations of the consumers towards the future of the organic movement.
- The role of trust in purchasing behaviors.
- The importance of supporting rural development.

Expectations of the consumers towards the future of the organic movement

The interpretation of the ideal-typical views shared by the consumers point out different expectations towards the Italian organic movement. Indeed, the first and the third factor believe in the need for increased institutional support for organic production since they view organic food as a sustainable and healthy product that should be available to all consumers. However, these two factors differ in the role that organic should play towards conventional. While the third factor believes that organic should take control of the current agricultural system, by maintaining its properties but using conventional features such as mass production, consumers and farmers sovereignty and advanced technology, the first factor places organic in opposition to the conventional sector. Therefore, both discourses accentuate the need to create a higher availability of organic products, but each of them proposes a different means to reach such a goal. The second factor, on the other hand, brings to the analysis a more critical perspective that seeks a more radical innovation to achieve sustainability. This is based on the argument that the production system that becomes mainstream and intensifies its production and is no longer sustainable and calling for a shifting focus from organic to non-industrial food, as the strong agreement on statement 4 shows (Table 3).

Regarding the role of the sector, the first factor is inclined towards maintaining the status quo. By making organic available to more consumers, organic production could help solve European food insecurity. This vision has direct policy implications which are: the need for a better labelling system and communication towards consumers; policies that would consider the true cost of industrial farming; the spread of organic products into all public facilities; more subsidies oriented towards environmental protection. As previously mentioned, the third factor has a similar vision but seeks production intensification for the future of the movement, raising the possi-

bility of organic to increase its share in the agri-food sector. Policy implications, in this case, are all based around the idea of giving farmers more space in the production and policy making systems. Therefore, consumers in the third factor suggest the inclusion of small farmers and consumers into policy making, more autonomy in sustainable production methods for famers, facilitate controls on organic and the introduction of tech solutions in organic agriculture. Finally, the third perspective would enhance the main principles of organic production, trying to reach new peaks of sustainability, with the help of other similar movements. Therefore, policy implications would involve: the consideration of the true cost of farming; better communication and labelling, starting from more consumers' education on food production systems; the introduction of small-scale farmers into the policy making process; and a stronger role of each State in the sector.

The role of trust in purchasing behaviors

Based on the consensus statements, we argue that all consumers in our sample follow similar discourse streams that nuances according to the factor they belong to. The first stream of consensus relates to consumers' trust in organic certification and methods for which all factors seem to agree (21: 0, 0, 0; 32: -2, -2, -3; 43: 0, 0, -1). Also, regarding trust, similar scores appear for local production whether organic or not, for which all factors have a similar score (9: +2, +1, -1). Although the topic of trust into certifications and local production seems prominent in all three factors, the study highlights how participants tent to have a very general understanding of what a certification really is and the actual differences between the terms "local", "sustainable", "organic" and similar. Finally, many statements share a consensus on the idea that policies and the State should play a stronger role on agricultural and environmental issues while including other stakeholders in the policymaking (33: +3, +2, +2; 27: +2, +3, +3; 12: +1, 0, +1). These similarities in all three discourses can be seen as a request from organic consumers to generally have more policies addressing the environment and supporting organic and local productions. Moreover, despite the differences of future worldviews, all viewpoints state the need to have a policy system that would better inform consumers not only on organic production but on the food production system in general. This expectation of the consumers was also explicitly stated during the sorting exercise.

As other previous studies also mention (Canavari, 2007; Annunziata *at al.*, 2011; De Magistris and Gracia Royo, 2012; Rete Rurale Nazionale, 2018), consumers perceive the labelling of organic products to be a quality signal, and very important in recognizing the differences between organic and non-organic. At the same time, they feel the need to have more information, especially related to the ethical/sustainable characteristics, that seems to be a valuable aspect to take into consideration (Zanoli *et al.*, 2012). However, previous studies on the expectations of consumers (Cicia *et al.*, 2002; Chinnici *et al.*, 2002; Defrancesco and Rossetto, 2007; Annunziata and Pascale, 2009; Pellegrini and Farinello, 2009; Annunziata *et al.*, 2011; Zanoli *et al.*, 2013; Annunziata and Vecchio, 2016; Rete Rurale Nazionale, 2018) tend to look at purchase preferences and motivations without deepening the sustainability and climate change issue. Nevertheless, our study underlined that such issues seriously concern organic consumers. All three factors agree that climate change and environmental issues go beyond organic agriculture which results in being powerless in the face of similar challenges. Hence, the need that all perspectives expressed have policies which deal with sustainability issues. These policies should take into consideration price and market volatility, production methods and climate change resilience.

The importance of supporting rural development

Finally, besides consensus statements, it is interesting to notice that all factors disagreed with the opinion that undermines the positive impact of organic agriculture on employment in rural areas, scoring statement 34 in the following way: F1 -5; F2 -3 and F3 -4. Such evaluation verifies the course of the rural development policy that is currently implemented. As Martindale *et al.*

(2018) underlines, most alternative food movements strongly relate to rural development and support local farmers' initiatives, and consumers seem to perceive the effort in dealing with those issues. Indeed, this strong awareness towards the positive impact that organic farming has on Italian employment is a consequence of the role of mainstream unions and established farmers associations in the organic movement growth, and the support of the State (Darnhofer *et al.*, 2019). In fact, even though the Italian government has always been passive in agricultural matters by leaving most of the decisions to regional governments, it has always supported the promotion of organic farming. The government facilitated the implementation of the organic meals at schools and launched the first National Plan for Organic Agriculture in 2005 (Darnhofer *et al.*, 2019).

6. Conclusions

Some authors argue that the organic movement will undergo a significant "metamorphosis" (Gould, 2015), in a sector which is known to be consumer driven, what path this metamorphosis will take can depend on consumers' expectations regarding the future of this movement. This study discovered three factors of organic consumers, differentiated by their discourse on the organic movement and its future: "mainstreaming for the better good", "critical supporters looking for more" and "organic intensification supporters". Despite their differences, all discourses showed the environment, local production, and more support from the state, to be the most pressing issues in our sample, regardless of the factor our participants matched.

Moreover, the study also highlighted a general discontent about policy intervention regarding the environment and consumers' education on food, whilst a general satisfaction regarding the link between organic production and employment in rural areas. The idea is that EU and State policies should have a greater part in contributing to the flourishing of the organic sector and of a more sustainable system. If we look at our results within the framework of the Organic 3.0, considered the strategic course of the movement, it is interesting to note that most of the consumers' expectations match the key ideas of the Organic 3.0 vision. However, it seems that mainstream consumers are hardly aware of the Organic 3.0 strategy and goals, confirming the need to improve communication with consumers. Based on our findings we argue that policymakers and organic movement proponents should not only inform consumers on the qualities of organic food, but also on their movement's policies and strategies. This would address the broader issue of sustainability in a way that would enable a wider acceptance of the organic principles. This approach seems to be a precondition for the new strategy, which counts on "integration of organic into the development of the planet and societies rather than concentration on the perfection of the niche" (Arbenz *et al.*, 2017, p. 207). Future studies within this context should aim on practices and perspectives of other stakeholders' groups for a better understanding of their expectations and eventual refinement of policy strategies.

Main limitations of the study are related to subject, object, and time. The identified perspectives represent ideal-type discourses that reflect subjective viewpoints of Italian organic consumers on selected aspects of the organic sector. Despite the extensive exploration of the existing discourse, the statements presented to the interviewed consumers do not cover *all* aspects of organic food consumption reflected by consumers themselves. At the same time, the results of the Q-method study cannot be generalized to the entire population of consumers in Italy. However, the purposive (non-probability) sample of 20 participants provides sufficient empirical data for extraction of factors, which meet the statistical criteria for reliability, and which can be meaningfully interpreted to understand perspectives of consumers in the given context.

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Appendix

Figure 1A - Distinguishing and consensus statements.

	dist.and.cons	f1_f2	sig_f1_f2	f1_f3	sig_f1_f3	f2_f3	sig_f2_f3
1		-0.344		0.299		0.642	*
2	Distinguishes all	-0.907	***	1.529	****	2.436	****
3	Distinguishes all	-1.403	****	-2.270	****	-0.867	**
4	Distinguishes all	0.807	**	1.664	****	0.857	**
5	Distinguishes all	0.960	***	1.722	****	0.761	*
6	Distinguishes f2 only	1.203	***	-0.148		-1.350	***
7	Distinguishes f3 only	0.289		0.972	**	0.683	*
8	Distinguishes all	1.069	***	1.878	****	0.809	**
9	Consensus	0.272		0.546		0.274	
10	Distinguishes f2 only	0.839	**	-0.356		-1.195	***
11	Distinguishes all	-0.769	**	0.788	*	1.558	****
12	Consensus	0.511		0.534		0.023	
13	Distinguishes f1 only	0.710	**	0.851	**	0.141	
14	Distinguishes f2 only	-1.053	***	0.233		1.286	***
15	Distinguishes f1 only	-1.783	****	-1.518	****	0.265	
16		1.037	***	0.517		-0.520	
17	Distinguishes f1 only	1.160	***	1.131	***	-0.029	
18	Distinguishes f3 only	-0.093		1.008	**	1.102	***
19	Distinguishes all	0.994	***	-0.793	*	-1.787	****
20	Distinguishes f2 only	1.656	****	0.135		-1.521	****
21	Consensus	0.360		0.247		-0.113	
22	Distinguishes f3 only	0.268		-1.475	***	-1.742	****
23	Distinguishes f3 only	0.342		1.513	****	1.171	***
24	Distinguishes all	1.480	****	-0.683	*	-2.162	****
25	Distinguishes f2 only	-1.507	****	-0.378		1.129	***
26	Distinguishes all	-2.228	****	-0.775	*	1.453	****
27	Consensus	-0.145		-0.532		-0.387	
28	Distinguishes f3 only	0.202		-1.078	***	-1.280	***
29	Distinguishes f3 only	-0.110		1.505	****	1.615	****
30	Distinguishes f2 only	-1.097	***	-0.369		0.728	*
31		0.770	**	0.598		-0.172	
32	Consensus	-0.365		0.078		0.443	
33	Consensus	0.207		0.232		0.024	
34	Distinguishes f2 only	-0.916	***	-0.279		0.637	*
35	Distinguishes f3 only	-0.442		0.814	**	1.256	***
36		-0.299		-0.843	**	-0.544	
37	Distinguishes f1 only	-1.171	***	-0.739	*	0.431	
38	Distinguishes f1 only	-1.313	****	-0.787	*	0.527	
39	Distinguishes all	-1.504	****	-2.124	****	-0.621	*
40	Distinguishes f3 only	0.318		-1.111	***	-1.429	***
41	Distinguishes f3 only	-0.421		-2.019	****	-1.598	****
42	Distinguishes f2 only	2.044	****	-0.096		-2.140	****
43	Consensus	0.218		0.495		0.276	
44	Distinguishes f3 only	0.157		-0.914	**	-1.071	***