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## EUROPEAN CONSUMERS' ATTITUDES TOWARD SUSTAINABLE FOOD CONSUMPTION – SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW

**Keywords:** consumer behaviour, consumer attitude, sustainable food consumption, systematic review, PRISMA

**ABSTRACT.** The increasing ecological, health, and social awareness has led European consumers to consider more sustainable food choices. However, their behaviours in this regard remain inconsistent. The aim of this paper is to systematically review the literature on European consumers' attitudes toward sustainable food consumption, with a particular focus on factors that either promote or hinder sustainable behaviours. The PRISMA methodology was applied, allowing for a systematic search, selection, and analysis of literature in terms of quality and content. The review is based on 43 publications that meet specific thematic and methodological criteria. The data were obtained from the Scopus database and include articles published between 2008 and 2024, with the greatest interest in the topic observed in recent years. The findings indicate that key factors promoting sustainable consumption include health consciousness, environmental concern, and a preference for local products. In contrast, significant barriers remain, such as high costs, limited availability, and attachment to traditional culinary habits. Disruptive events such as the COVID-19 pandemic and geopolitical conflicts have influenced consumer attitudes and increased interest in locally sourced products. The results suggest that targeted educational policies and efforts to build trust in institutions are essential for effectively promoting sustainable consumption. Furthermore, strategies encouraging responsible consumption patterns should consider cultural and demographic differences to better bridge the gap between environmental awareness and actual consumer choices.

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## INTRODUCTION

Sustainable food consumption has become a critical issue in both academic and policy discussions, particularly in light of increasing global challenges such as climate change, resource depletion, and biodiversity loss. The food industry is one of the key contributors to environmental degradation, and as a result, the promotion of more sustainable food practices is seen as essential to reducing the ecological footprint of human activities. In Europe, there has been a growing emphasis on encouraging consumers to adopt more sustainable food consumption behaviors, such as choosing locally sourced products, reducing meat consumption, and supporting environmentally friendly production methods. However, despite this growing emphasis, consumer behavior in this domain remains complex and often inconsistent.

The purpose of this paper is to systematically review existing literature on the attitudes and behaviors of European consumers toward sustainable food consumption. While there is widespread recognition of the importance of sustainable consumption, many consumers continue to prioritize convenience, cost, and habitual preferences over environmental considerations. This phenomenon, often referred to as the attitude-behavior gap, highlights the complexity of changing consumer habits and the barriers that prevent widespread adoption of sustainable practices. Understanding these barriers, as well as the factors that motivate sustainable behavior, is crucial for developing effective policies and strategies to promote sustainability in food systems. The European context, with its diverse cultural, economic, and regulatory environments, offers a unique landscape for studying sustainable food consumption.

This paper employs the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) framework to conduct a systematic review of existing studies on European consumers' attitudes toward sustainable food consumption. Through a combination of bibliometric and content analysis, this review explores the internal and external factors that influence consumer decisions, including health concerns, environmental awareness, localism, price sensitivity, and socio-political events like the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine. By identifying the most significant factors that shape consumer behavior, this study contributes to the broader discourse on how to create more resilient and sustainable food systems in the face of global challenges.

The structure of this paper is as follows. First, the methodology used for the systematic review is outlined. This is followed by a bibliometric and content analysis of the literature. The paper concludes with a discussion of the findings and their implications for future research and policy initiatives.

## RESEARCH MATERIAL AND METHODOLOGY

In our study, we followed the PRISMA guidelines for conducting literature research (Page, et al. 2021). PRISMA is an evidence-based checklist designed to guide researchers in conducting systematic reviews and meta-analyses. The PRISMA process involves three stages: (1) identification, (2) screening, and (3) inclusion. This structured approach helps researchers identify the most relevant publications on the topic under investigation. The results obtained through this method facilitate both quantitative and qualitative analysis. PRISMA is widely used to enhance the clarity, transparency, and completeness of systematic review reporting. Our research was conducted in September 2024. During the identification phase, we utilized the Scopus database, recognized as one of the most comprehensive and reliable sources of academic information. To ensure the relevance of the selected articles, we applied the following inclusion criteria: (i) articles focusing on consumer behavior and attitudes, (ii) related to sustainable food consumption, (iii) within European countries. We limited our search to titles, abstracts, and keywords, targeting relevant subject areas such as economics, econometrics and finance; social sciences; business, management, and accounting; as well as agricultural and biological sciences. Additionally, only articles written in English were considered. Our final data collection was based on the following search phrase:

TITLE-ABS-KEY ( ( “consumer\* behavio\*” OR attitude OR action\* OR tpb OR adoption OR “theory of reasoned action” OR “value-belief norm” OR consumer ) AND ( “sustainable consumption of food” OR “sustainable food consumption”) AND ( eu OR europe OR “european union” OR spain OR poland OR germany OR italy OR greece OR france OR malta OR cyprus OR uk OR “United Kingdom” OR portugal OR bulgaria OR sweden OR finland OR austria OR romania OR hungary OR iceland OR denmark OR luxembourg OR montenegro OR estonia OR slovenia OR slovakia OR latvia OR kosovo OR “north macedonia” OR lithuania OR albania OR “Bosna and Hercegovina” OR moldova OR croatia OR ireland OR norway OR switzerland OR serbia OR belarus OR romania OR ukraine OR netherlands OR belgium OR czech OR “Czech republic” ) ) AND ( LIMIT-TO ( SUBJAREA,”ECON” ) OR LIMIT-TO ( SUBJAREA,”SOCI” ) OR LIMIT-TO ( SUBJAREA,”BUSI” ) OR LIMIT-TO ( SUBJAREA,”AGRI” ) ) AND ( LIMIT-TO ( LANGUAGE,”English” ) ).

After the initial search, we identified a total of 98 documents. During the abstract screening, 26 records were excluded due to irrelevance. The remaining 72 papers underwent a detailed eligibility assessment. Fifteen articles were excluded due to lack of full-text access, and another 14 were disqualified for not focusing on the consumer perspective. Ultimately, we finalized a sample of 43 publications, which formed the basis for the subsequent quantitative and qualitative analyses. Figure 1 offers a visual summary of the literature selection process.

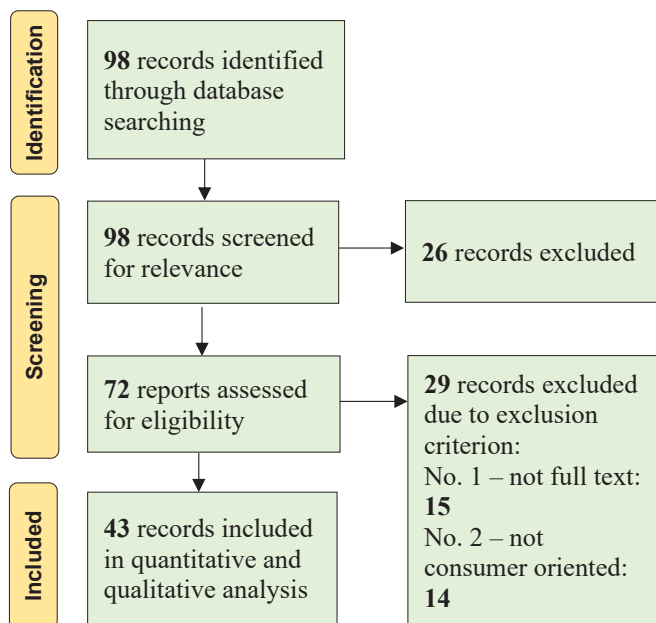


Figure 1. PRISMA flow diagram modified to authors' research

Source: PRISMA 2020 flow diagram (<https://www.prisma-statement.org/prisma-2020-flow-diagram>)

## RESEARCH RESULTS

### BIBLIOMETRIC STATISTICS

The analysis of the results begins with an overview of the temporal and geographical scope of the research, as shown in Table 1. Since no time restrictions were applied during the search, a few individual articles from 2008, 2013, 2015, and 2016 were identified. The number of articles started to increase notably in 2017, peaking in 2024 with 11 publications, indicating a growing interest in this subject. Geographically, the articles primarily focus on countries in Southern Europe, such as Italy, Romania, Hungary, and Greece. However, many of these studies were published in niche or lower-ranked journals.

The most frequently cited factors shaping consumers' attitudes toward sustainable food consumption were internal ones, including a healthy lifestyle (26 articles), concern for the environment and animal welfare (21 articles), attachment to local products (14 articles), and a desire to reduce meat consumption (7 articles). External influences included deglobalization (5 articles) and the COVID-19 pandemic (5 articles). The following section delves into a detailed analysis of these factors.

Table 1. Spatial, time and journal scope of reviewed papers

Time scope of articles		Spatial scope of articles		Journal scope of articles	
Year	no. of articles	country	no. of articles	journal name	no. of articles
2008	1	Italy	7	<i>Sustainability</i>	12
2013	1	Romania	5	<i>Food Quality and Preference</i>	3
2015	1	Hungary	4	<i>Agriculture</i>	2
2016	1	Denmark	3	<i>Cleaner and Responsible Consumption</i>	2
2017	2	Greece	3	<i>Frontiers in Sustainable Food Systems</i>	2
2018	2	Belgium	2	<i>International Journal of Food Sciences and Nutrition</i>	2
2019	3	Finland	2	<i>British Food Journal</i>	2
2020	2	Spain	2	Other journals	1
2021	9	Portugal	2		
2022	6	Austria, UK, Lithuania, Germany, Slovakia, Slovenia, Switzerland, Sweden	1		
2023	4	Multi country	5		
2024	11				

Source: own study

## CONTENT ANALYSIS

### EXTERNAL DETERMINANTS OF CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR TOWARDS SUSTAINABLE FOOD CONSUMPTION

Recent disruptive events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine, as well as climate change, have intensified the process of “deglobalization” of food consumption (Muresan et al., 2021; Kristia, Kovács, Bács, Rabbi, 2023). Findings of Onorati, d’Ovidi, D’Uggento and Toma (2024) show that these events have triggered new trends in food consumption globally, revealing vulnerabilities related to dependency on certain products. Consequently, consumers are increasingly favoring locally sourced

products (Kovács, Lendvai, Beke, 2022), which are perceived as high-quality, contributing to a trend of patriotic and nationalistic “locavorism” (Holotová, Horská, Nagyová, 2021). This shift is supported by research from Brumă, Ulman, Tanasă and Cautisanu (2022) among Romanian consumers, indicating that local food support has increased during the pandemic. Consumers have become more responsible regarding the purchase and waste of fresh vegetables and meat, opting to buy more frequently and waste less. However, interest in organic food seemed to decline during this period. Castellini, Savarese and Graffigna (2021) assert that the psychological impact of the COVID-19 emergency has altered consumer attitudes toward sustainability, encouraging dietary choices that promote human health, environmental preservation, and animal welfare for future generations.

Among various external factors, institutions – political, educational, and social – play a significant role in shaping sustainable food consumption attitudes. Wollmar, Sjöberg and Post (2022) emphasizes the need to build trust in public institutions to effectively promote sustainable food behaviors. Theodoridis, Zacharatos and Boukouvala (2024), through their research on food waste in Greece, highlight the importance of targeted education and awareness campaigns in fostering a more environmentally conscious approach to food consumption. Moreover, Markoni et al. (2023) suggest that policy interventions tailored to specific regional, cultural, and consumer group characteristics can help promote meat reduction by focusing on social practices rather than individual behaviors.

Reducing current levels of meat consumption can yield significant environmental benefits. However, the transition towards plant-rich diets has been slow, with limited success in understanding behavior changes in this area within the social sciences (Hielkema, Lund, 2021). For instance, Lund and Halkier (2024) found that social networks influence meat-consumption behaviors, noting that exposure from various network sources is crucial for behavioral adoption. This exposure is especially important for the initial decision to reduce meat intake. According to Simeone and Scarpato (2020), social networks can both positively and negatively influence consumer behavior and awareness related to sustainable consumption. Furthermore, research by Pais, Marques and Fuinhas (2023) indicates that more environmentally conscious and informed consumers are more likely to choose plant-based meals. Therefore, it falls upon policymakers to emphasize education regarding food characteristics and its societal impacts (Jallinoja, Niva, Latvala, 2016; Thøgersen, 2017). Countries such as the USA, Italy, and Germany may be particularly advantageous for sustainable diet campaigns despite facing negative food trend influences (Pucci, Casprini, Sogari, Zanni, 2022). Distinctions between consumer behavior in different regions were noted by Fogarassy, Nguyen, Olah and Popp (2018), while Swiss consumers easily adopt marketing tools and engage in social discussions promoting sustainable practices, Hungarian consumers require new regulations and legislative frameworks for similar outcomes.

## INTERNAL MOTIVES OF SUSTAINABLE FOOD CONSUMPTION IMPLEMENTATION

Vermeir and Verbeke (2008) conducted pioneering research assessing the influence of determinants suggested by the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) – attitudes, perceived behavioral control, and social norms – on sustainable consumption intention considering consumers' perceived confidence and personal values. Scientific literature identifies six primary drivers for sustainable food consumption: environment and health (Dzene, Eglite, 2012), human rights, taste/quality (Scalvedi, Turrini, Saba, 2018), culture (Nemeth, Rudnak, Ymeri, Fogarassy, 2019), relationships (Boca, 2021), alongside four key obstacles: availability (Terlau, Hirsch, 2015), cost (Petrescu, Oncioiu, Petrescu, 2017), and culinary habits/traditions (Lema-Blanco, García-Mira, Cantero, 2023). Potential consumers often prioritize environmental factors, supplemented by considerations of fashion and identity construction. In terms of obstacles, cost is a primary concern, with products' availability and culinary habits deemed less relevant. Notably, the creation of social networks allowing for shared information and competencies is recognized as a potential facilitator of sustainable consumption behaviors (Genova, Allegratti, 2024). Research by Gravelines, Banyte, Dovaliene and Gadeikiene (2022) emphasizes how green self-identity and self-congruity can positively influence sustainable behaviors both directly and indirectly.

A crucial question is whether consumers value environmental sustainability in food purchases, which can shape their buying habits. A majority of Austrian and Belgian respondents expressed concern for animal welfare and regionality when choosing food (Haider, Essl, Zulka, Schindler, 2022). An online survey across five European nations (Czechia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and the UK) revealed that freshness, quality, taste, and animal welfare were considered the most important attributes in meat and dairy purchases, while environmental aspects were deemed less significant (Ammann et al., 2024). Information about animal welfare, food safety, and nutrition was seen as more important than environmental sustainability (Madureira, Nunes, Veiga, Saralegui-Diez, 2021). This aligns with findings from Gáthy, Soltész and Szűcs (2022), and Panatsa and Malandrakis (2024), which indicated a tendency for non-moral considerations to outweigh moral ones.

The results of Moisés, Tomazini, Fernandes and Ribeiro et al. (2024) confirm that generation is a differentiating factor of sustainable attitudes and behaviors highlighting the existence of statistically significant differences between Generations Z, Y and X with regard to ecological awareness, ecologically oriented purchasing patterns, and the manifestation of sustainable attitudes and behaviors during food purchases. The results of Kamenidou, Mamalis, Pavlidis and Bara (2019) revealed that the focus of sustainable food consumption of Z generation behavior is limited to eating seasonal fruits and vegetables and purchasing regional food. Nemeth et al. (2019) emphasized the role of cultural factors



influencing eating habits and local food supply conditions. From a study of Simeone and Verneau (2024) a great symbolic value for food emerges. It seems closely linked to traditions and history and also a certain consumers' reluctance to changing products when food production traditions can be undermined by sustainable practices. Changing strong tradition in food consumption requires the diffusion of a new awareness about quality dimensions such as generating new automatisms in food choices. O'Neill, Clear, Friday and Hazas (2019) suggest that transitions in practices may occur as a result of learning a new skill, moving house, having a family, following public events such as a high-profile media campaign or via specific "sharing spaces", such as co-housing, forage walks and community gardens.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The systematic review of literature reveals that European consumers' attitudes towards sustainable food consumption are shaped by a complex interplay of internal and external factors. Health consciousness, environmental concerns, and localism emerged as dominant drivers, while barriers such as cost, availability, and culinary traditions persist. External factors, including the COVID-19 pandemic and the deglobalization of food production, have further heightened the importance of local and sustainable food sourcing.

Despite a growing interest in sustainable food consumption, there is still a significant gap between consumer awareness and actual behavior, often referred to as the attitude-behavior gap. The findings suggest that tailored policy interventions, education campaigns, and efforts to build trust in public institutions are crucial for promoting more sustainable food consumption patterns. Moreover, generational differences indicate the need for strategies that address specific demographic groups to drive behavioral change effectively.

This review provides a foundation for future research to explore how different cultural, economic, and social contexts influence sustainable consumption behaviors across Europe, and calls for more targeted approaches to bridge the gap between consumer intentions and actions.

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## POSTAWY EUROPEJSKICH KONSUMENTÓW WZGLĘDEM ZRÓWNOWAŻONEJ KONSUMPCJI ŻYWNOŚCI – SYSTEMATYCZNY PRZEGLĄD LITERATURY

Słowa kluczowe: zachowania konsumentów, postawy konsumentów, zrównoważona konsumpcja żywności, przegląd systematyczny, PRISMA

**ABSTRAKT.** Wzrost świadomości ekologicznej, zdrowotnej i społecznej sprawia, że konsumenci w Europie coraz częściej rozważają bardziej zrównoważone wybory żywieniowe, jednak ich zachowania w tym zakresie pozostają niejednorodne. Celem artykułu jest systematyczny przegląd literatury, dotyczącej postaw europejskich konsumentów względem zrównoważonej konsumpcji żywności, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem czynników, które sprzyjają lub hamują zrównoważone zachowania. Zastosowano metodę PRISMA, co pozwoliło na systematyczne przeszukanie, selekcję i analizę literatury pod kątem jakości i zawartości merytorycznej. Przegląd oparto na 43 publikacjach naukowych spełniających określone kryteria tematyczne i metodyczne. Dane pochodziły z bazy Scopus i obejmowały artykuły opublikowane w latach 2008-2024, przy czym największe zainteresowanie tematem odnotowano w ostatnich latach. Wyniki wskazują, że kluczowymi czynnikami sprzyjającymi zrównoważonej konsumpcji są świadomość zdrowotna, troska o środowisko i preferencja dla produktów lokalnych. Natomiast istotnymi barierami pozostają wysoki koszt, ograniczona dostępność i przywiązanie do tradycyjnych nawyków kulinarnych. Dodatkowo, wydarzenia zakłócające, takie jak pandemia COVID-19 i konflikty geopolityczne, wpłynęły na zmianę postaw konsumenckich i zwiększyły zainteresowanie produktami pochodzenia lokalnego. Wyniki sugerują, że dla skutecznej promocji zrównoważonej konsumpcji konieczne są ukierunkowane polityki edukacyjne i działania wspierające zaufanie do instytucji. Ponadto strategie promujące bardziej odpowiedzialne wzorce konsumpcji powinny uwzględniać różnice kulturowe i demograficzne, aby skuteczniej niwelować lukę między świadomością ekologiczną a rzeczywistymi wyborami konsumenckimi.

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