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Exploring Consumer`s Behavior Regarding Organic Food in Portugal.

Explorando o Comportamento do Consumidor em Relação a Alimentos Biológicos em Portugal.

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Abstract

In an increasingly environmentally and health-conscious society, organic products are gaining prominence as a relevant alternative consumption choice, associated with healthier lifestyles and more sustainable practices. Drawing on an extensive literature review and data collected through an online questionnaire disseminated via social me-dia platforms, this study adopts an exploratory and descriptive research design to ex-amine consumer behavior regarding organic food products. The study aims to provide stakeholders, including producers, retailers, and policymakers, with evidence-based insights that may support the development of more effective strategies and policies to promote organic food consumption for health-related and environmental reasons. The results reveal that the majority of respondents consume organic food only sporadical-ly, with supermarkets being the primary place of purchase. Fruits and vegetables are the most frequently purchased organic products, and health, taste, and perceived quali-ty emerge as the main motivations for consumption. Although most respondents report familiarity with organic certification logos and labels, some degree of uncertainty re-mains. Regarding willingness to pay a price premium, the findings indicate that most consumers are unwilling to pay more than one additional euro for organic food prod-ucts.

Keywords: Organic Food; Consumer`s behavior, Portugal.

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1 INTRODUCTION

Consumers are increasingly adopting dietary practices that prioritize natural, nutritious, and sustainable foods, driven by growing awareness of health and environmental issues (Shahbandeh, 2023; Fontes et al., 2021). Organic food represents a distinctive category within ecological, ethical, and sustainable products (Kushwah et al., 2019a,b), frequently associated with attributes such as "natural," "healthy," "safe," and "high quality," largely due to the absence of synthetic chemicals in its production processes (Rana & Paul, 2017). Beyond individual health benefits, the consumption of organic food supports rural development and reinforces the socio-economic role of farmers (Zollet, 2024). Moreover, organic agricultural practices contribute to biodiversity conservation, improved soil fertility, and the reduction of chemical inputs (Gamage et al., 2023).

Within the European Union (EU), organic food production and marketing are regulated through specific certification schemes designed to ensure compliance with sustainability, animal welfare, and health standards (Jain et al., 2022). Despite increasing consumer interest, however, the organic food market continues to display a persistent gap between favorable attitudes and actual purchasing behavior. This gap is influenced by several factors, including price premiums, limited familiarity with certification labels, and perceived uncertainty regarding the benefits of organic products.

Although previous studies have extensively documented the environmental and health advantages of organic food, fewer have analyzed consumer behavior using an integrated framework that simultaneously considers motivations, purchasing patterns, familiarity with certification, and willingness to pay. This study contributes to the existing literature by providing empirical evidence on these interconnected dimensions, offering insights into how consumers evaluate organic products and the barriers that hinder wider market adoption.

From a managerial perspective, the findings are particularly relevant for producers, retailers, and policymakers seeking to strengthen demand for organic food and to design interventions that promote more sustainable consumption patterns. By examining the factors that shape consumer decision-making, this study advances understanding of how positive perceptions of organic food translate, or fail to translate, into actual purchasing

behavior, thereby contributing to ongoing debates on sustainable consumption and food choice.

Despite the growing interest in sustainable consumption, there remains a need for empirical evidence that integrates consumer motivations, familiarity with certification labels, and price sensitivity within the Portuguese context. To address this gap, the present study aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of consumer behavior regarding organic food products. Specifically, it pursues three main objectives: (1) to analyse consumer perceptions and motivations associated with organic food; (2) to assess familiarity with organic certification labels; and (3) to examine consumers` willingness to pay a price premium for organic products. In line with these objectives, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1. Health-related motives are positively associated with organic food consumption.

H2. Environmental and sustainability motives are positively associated with organic food consumption.

H3. Familiarity with certification labels is positively associated with willingness to pay a price premium.

H4. Price sensitivity negatively influences purchase frequency.

The remainder of the article is organized as follows. Section 2 reviews the relevant literature. Section 3 outlines the methodological approach. Section 4 presents and discusses the empirical results. Section 5 concludes with implications, limitations, and directions for future research.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Sustainability and the Organic Food Products Sector

Consumers are increasingly adopting dietary practices that prioritize natural, nutritious, and sustainable foods, driven by growing awareness of health and environmental issues (Shahbandeh, 2023; Fontes et al., 2021). This aligns with the fundamental definition of sustainability as "meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (WCED, 1987), a concept which has seen remarkable awareness growth over recent decades (Grunert, 2011). However, sustainability in the food sector represents a multidimensional phenomenon encompassing ecological, social and ethical concerns (Nguyen, 2018). Organic food represents a distinctive category within ethical and sustainable products, frequently associated with attributes such as "natural," "healthy," "safe," and "high quality," largely due to the absence of synthetic chemicals in its production processes (Rana & Paul, 2017). Indeed, it is considered a safer and more ecological consumption alternative (Tandon et al., 2020), aligning with the broader consumer consciousness regarding environmental impact (Contini & Peruzzini, 2022). Organic food can thus be defined as "quality food products obtained according to the standards of organic agriculture, free of artificial chemicals, which promote the health of soils, ecosystems, and human beings, respecting future generations" (Ferreira & Pereira, 2023). Beyond individual health benefits, the consumption of organic food supports rural development and reinforces the socio-economic role of farmers (Zollet, 2024). In addition, organic agricultural practices contribute to biodiversity conservation, improved soil fertility, and reduced chemical inputs (Gamage et al., 2023). This global shift towards healthier and more sustainable lifestyles has driven increased interest in, and consumption of, organic food as a solution to environmental challenges (Singh et al., 2025).

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Between 2012 and 2022, the share of total organic area in the EU's total utilized agricultural area (UAA) rose from 5.9% to an estimated 10.5%, covering in 2022 16.9 million hectares of agricultural land. The countries with the highest shares of organic area within total UAA in 2022 were Austria (27%), Estonia (23%) and Sweden (20%) (Eurostat, 2024). Figure 1 presents the organic area in 2022.

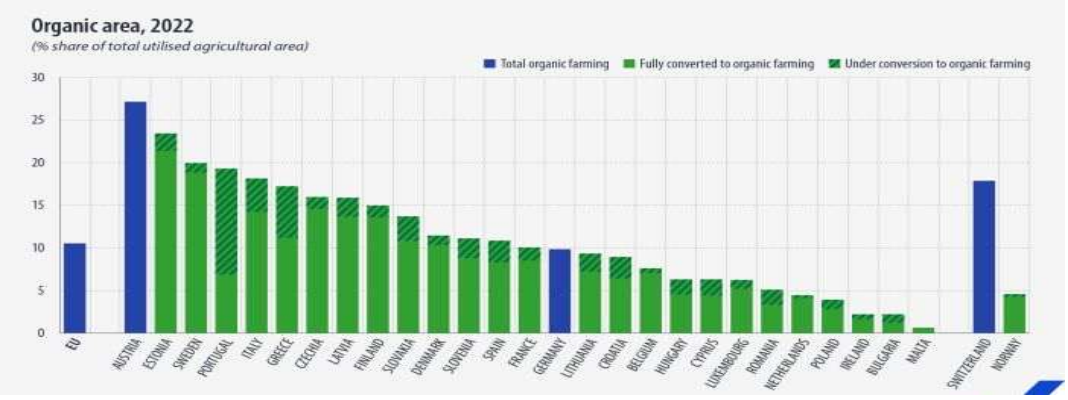

Fig. 1 - *Organic area in EU MSs (% share of total UAA)*
Source: Eurostat (2024).

The proportion of EU agricultural land devoted to organic farming increased by more than 50% between 2012 and 2022. During this period, the proportion of land dedicated to organic farming increased in all EU countries except Poland, as it experienced a decline in organic farming land, but this trend reversed in 2019. France, Spain, Italy, and Germany had the largest areas of land dedicated to organic farming in the EU, representing 56,4% of the total in 2022. With lower percentages, but still important, are Greece with 5,5% and Portugal with 4,5% (Eurostat, 2024). Figure 2 presents these values.

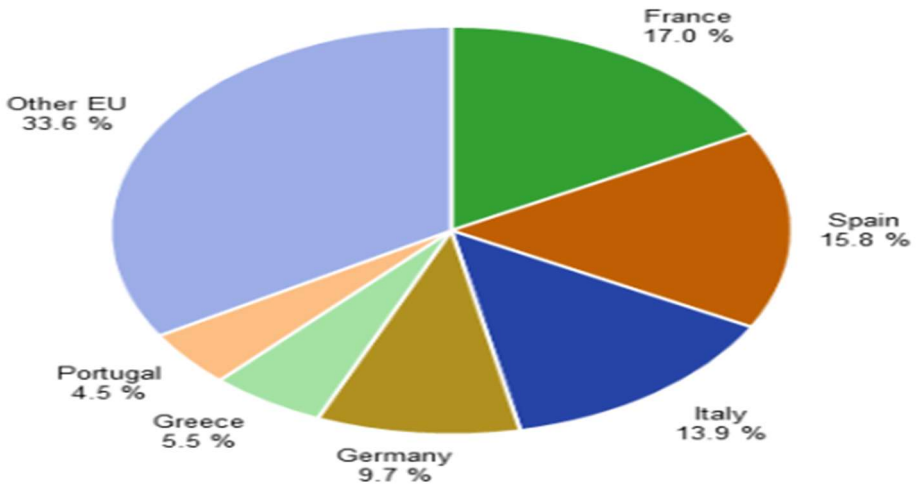

Fig. 2 - *Share of the EU`s total organic area (fully converted and under conversion) (% 2022).*

Source: Eurostat (2024).

2.2 Labelling

According to Regulation (EU) No 1169/2011 of the European Parliament and Council of 17 December 2011 on the provision of food information to consumers, labeling includes all information, indications, labels, or symbols related to a particular foodstuff that are included on any packaging, document, notice, label, ring, or choker attached to the product or referring to it. European Union (EU) Regulation 2018/848, approved by the European Parliament and the Council on 30 May 2018, concerns the production and labeling of organic products. According to this regulation, a product is considered organic if it has been labeled, advertised, or described in commercial documents in a way that suggests it was produced in accordance with these rules. **Fo**r all EU Member States (MSs), this regulation establishes the terms by which a country can designate an organically produced product. In Portugal, only the term 'biológico' (organic in Portuguese) and 'bio' are allowed. The use of these terms is only permitted in the case of products of animal and plant origin, both in their natural and processed state, if all the ingredients of the product are of organic origin and if the production process itself is

organic. It is strictly forbidden to use the terms and brand names, or practices mentioned that could mislead the consumer if the product does not fulfill the requirements demanded by this regulation for the production of organic products (European Commission, 2023a,b).

2.3 Consumer Behavior

Consumer behavior is far from linear. It involves a dynamic and multifaceted set of processes that extend beyond the simple act of purchasing. These encompass the acquisition, consumption, evaluation and acceptance or rejection of products, services, ideas and experiences.

According to Mowen (1993), consumer behavior encompasses the dynamics of purchasing and exchange that facilitate interactions between consumers and the market. This understanding is expanded upon by Engel et al. (1995, 2000), who argue that consumer behavior extends beyond simple commercial transactions. It encompasses activities such as obtaining, consuming and rejecting products and services, as well as the decision-making processes that precede and follow these actions. Building on this perspective, Mittal et al. (2001) emphasize that consumer behavior involves not only physical actions but also the mental and social dimensions of consumption. Thoughts, social interactions, purchasing decisions and the subsequent use or disposal of products and services are therefore integral to the broader study of consumer behavior.

From a behavioral standpoint, consumption decisions are influenced by individual motivations, cognitive evaluations and emotional responses, while social, cultural and contextual factors further shape how consumers perceive value and make trade-offs in their decision-making. However, Solomon (2016) highlights the complexity of the motivations that drive consumer behavior, noting that traditional approaches often adopt a utilitarian and rational perspective. The author emphasizes the importance of hedonic motives and the pursuit of pleasure in purchasing decisions. Within this context, Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Figure 3) offers a useful framework for understanding consumer priorities, but Solomon cautions against interpreting this model in a strictly linear manner, as consumer priorities vary across individuals and throughout different stages of life.

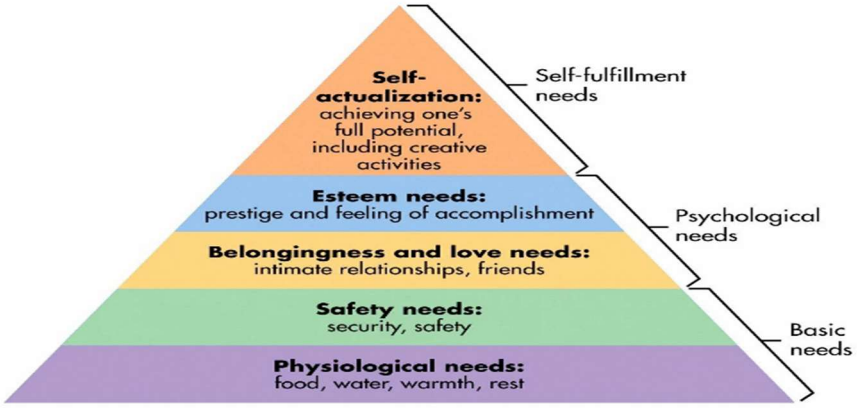

Fig. 3 - *Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs.*

Source: Custódio, 2022.

A variety of factors influence purchasing decisions, from basic needs to more complex and emotional aspirations – this is the dynamic view of consumer behavior. Consumer behavior is shaped by a complex interplay between individual, social, cultural, and situational factors, making this field of study both fascinating and challenging (Soares, 2020).

2.4 Barriers and Facilitators to Organic Food Consumption

Despite the growing interest in organic food consumption, driven by rising concerns surrounding health, sustainability, and food safety, its purchase remains relatively low (van Bussel et al., 2022). This illustrates a phenomenon widely recognized as the attitude-behavior gap (Tandon et al., 2020), where positive consumer attitudes towards organic products do not consistently translate into actual purchasing behavior. The primary obstacles include the high cost of organic products compared to conventional alternatives and the limited variety or accessibility in common local markets (Thøgersen, 2010). Indeed, the perception that these products are a luxury due to their price premium and restricted availability in conventional sales channels acts as a significant deterrent to purchase intent (Ferreira & Pereira, 2023). Furthermore, a lack of consumer trust and insufficient knowledge can also explain this low purchase rate (Padel & Foster, 2005; Rödiger et al., 2020). If consumers harbor doubts about the authenticity of labels, the

effectiveness of organic products, or feel confused about which products are genuinely organic, they are more likely to opt for conventional products due to perceived ease and convenience (Singh et al., 2025; Contini & Peruzzini, 2022).

Nevertheless, significant segments of consumers worldwide actively purchase organic food, each driven by distinct motivations. The main reasons include health and food safety, environmental concern, quality, and taste, but can also simply be a way to express personal values (Singh et al., 2025). These consumer motivations can be categorized based on their underlying structures. According to the Self-Determination Theory, organic food consumption is influenced by complex intrinsic or extrinsic motivations (Tandon et al., 2020). Intrinsic motivation arises from the inherent satisfaction or pleasure derived from the act, such as supporting environmental preservation. Conversely, extrinsic motivation stems from separable outcomes, such as pursuing health benefits or achieving social status. Even if motivated extrinsically, these consumers contribute to planetary protection (Diamantopoulos et al., 2003). Crucially, purchase decisions are also shaped by external factors such as age, income, educational level, cultural background, regional context, and the buyer's personal involvement with ecological causes (Singh et al., 2025). These interconnected factors collectively influence lifestyles and individual priorities regarding environmental issues and their potential positive impact on the planet.

2.5 Greenwashing

The term greenwashing was first introduced in 1986 by environmentalist Jay Westerveld, who identified misleading environmental practices in the hospitality sector when a hotel encouraged guests to reuse towels under the pretext of environmental concern, while primarily aiming to reduce operational costs. He compared this practice to concealing something undesirable with a superficial appearance of cleanliness, coining the analogy with whitewashing (Lane, 2019).

Since then, several authors have sought to conceptualize greenwashing. Delmas and Burbano (2011) define it as the act of misleading consumers regarding a company's environmental practices or the environmental benefits of a product or service. Similarly, Tateishi (2018) describes greenwashing as a form of communication that distorts or exaggerates environmental performance or benefits. Despite these contributions, there is

still no universally accepted definition of greenwashing, as highlighted by Lyon and Montgomery (2015).

In the context of growing environmental awareness, companies increasingly attempt to associate their brands with sustainability values. However, when communication efforts outweigh concrete and substantive environmental actions, such practices may constitute greenwashing. Within organic production, this phenomenon often manifests through vague or exaggerated claims, the use of questionable certifications, or visual elements that evoke nature to suggest sustainability without adequate substantiation. As consumer demand for organic and environmentally friendly products continues to rise, opportunities for greenwashing practices also increase. To mitigate this issue, it is essential that consumers critically assess environmental claims by verifying certification credibility, seeking information on production practices, and considering companies' overall sustainability records. Furthermore, stricter regulations and greater transparency can play a key role in reducing greenwashing and fostering a more ethical and responsible organic production sector (Ferreira, 2022)

3 METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a descriptive and exploratory research approach, which is particularly suitable for analyzing consumers` perceptions and behaviors in contexts where limited prior empirical evidence exists. The methodology is based on the collection of primary data through questionnaires, with the objective of identifying patterns and gaining insights rather than testing hypotheses or applying statistical inference. Such an approach is widely used in exploratory consumer research, as it allows for an initial understanding of attitudes and perceptions and provides a foundation for future, more analytical studies (Saunders et al., 2019).

3.1 Questionnaire Design

To achieve the research objectives of understanding the profile, perceptions, and influencing factors of organic product consumers, a comprehensive quantitative survey instrument was developed. The questionnaire was meticulously designed, refined through a robust testing process, and disseminated across various social media platforms (Instagram, Facebook, and LinkedIn) from April 1st to June 1st, 2024. The primary goal

of this instrument was to gather detailed information regarding consumer habits, perceptions, and behaviors pertaining to organic products.

The development of the questionnaire commenced with an extensive review of contemporary scientific literature on organic product consumption. This initial phase informed the construction of a provisional questionnaire, ensuring its alignment with established theories and relevant research gaps. To optimize clarity, precision, and respondent engagement, this preliminary version underwent an iterative refinement process, incorporating a "think-aloud" protocol. Seven voluntary respondents, encompassing a diverse range of socioeconomic backgrounds and demographic characteristics (including age, gender, civil status, income, residence, nationality, occupation, and education level, as reflected in the demographic section of the final questionnaire), participated in this critical testing phase. During these sessions, participants were encouraged to vocalize their thoughts and interpretations as they navigated each question. This qualitative technique, supported by methodologies from Ericsson & Bryman (2007), Gilhooly et al. (2007), Ryan et al. (2009), and Sandberg & Alvesson (2011), provided invaluable direct insights into potential ambiguities, cognitive burdens, and overall comprehensibility. The feedback garnered from the "think-aloud" interviews was instrumental in streamlining the questionnaire, reducing its length, and enhancing the clarity of individual questions, thereby minimizing respondent fatigue and maximizing data quality.

The final questionnaire was structured into two main parts. The first gathered demographic data, while the second focused on consumer behavior concerning organic products. This latter section included questions on the identification and recognition of organic products (e.g., EU logo, characteristics, identification methods, and a visual identification task based on images of vegetables), purchasing habits and frequency, the perceived importance of packaging, motivations for consuming organic products (e.g., health preferences, animal welfare, environmental concern, supporting local farmers), and self-assessed susceptibility to influence. It also incorporated 5-point Likert scales to assess agreement with statements about organic products (e.g., supply, price, environmental preservation, appearance) and perceived barriers to consumption (e.g., uncertainty, quality doubts, lack of certification). The questionnaire was provided in a

dual-language format (Portuguese and English) and included an explicit consent statement to ensure ethical data collection. An explicit consent mechanism, requiring participants to confirm they were over 18 and agreed to participate, was embedded at the beginning of the questionnaire to ensure ethical data collection practices. This rigorous design process aimed to create a robust and valid instrument for collecting accurate and comprehensive data on consumer behavior towards organic products.

3.2 Respondents Socioeconomic Description

The questionnaire was administered online over a 60-day period, yielding a total of 165 valid responses for analysis. Rigorous ethical considerations were upheld throughout the data collection process, ensuring that all participants were over 18 years of age, provided explicit voluntary consent to participate, were adequately informed about the study's objectives, and submitted their responses anonymously. Given that the researchers are Portuguese and based in Portugal, a demographic predisposition was anticipated, with the sample predominantly comprising Portuguese nationals (95%) and residents. The collected sample exhibits distinct characteristics: respondents' average age was 27, reflecting a relatively young cohort; a notable majority (72%) were female; most individuals were single (68%); with respect to economic status, 28% reported an income above the national average. Geographically, 65% of the sample resided in urban areas, indicating a significant representation from city dwellers. Occupational distribution revealed that 52% were employed, 33% were students, 10% were simultaneously engaged in employment and education, and 5% were unemployed. Educational attainment was also varied, with 37% having completed secondary education, 42% holding a bachelor's degree and 11% a master’s degree, suggesting a well-educated sample base. The following Figure 4 presents the respondents` socioeconomic characterization.

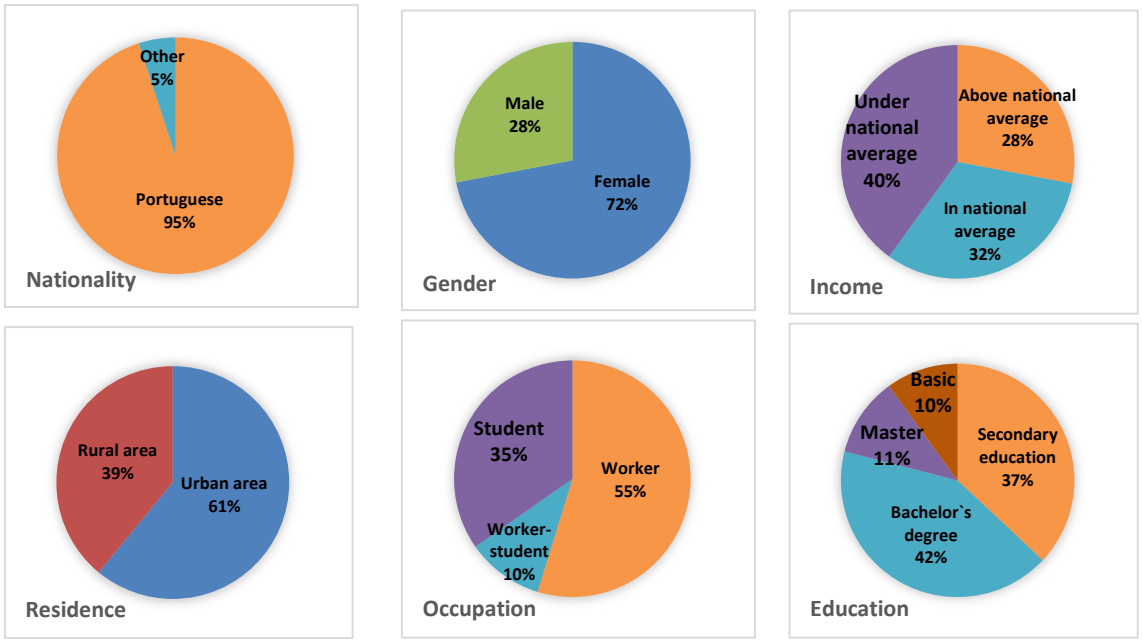

Fig. 4 - *Respondents` socioeconomic characterization*

Source: Authors` elaboration (2025).

4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Analysis of Results and Patterns

The descriptive analysis of the data collected reveals that while organic food consumption is present in the Portuguese market, it remains largely inconsistent, with 61% of respondents purchasing these products only sporadically. Modern retail serves as the primary gateway for these consumers, as 67% of the sample identifies supermarkets and hypermarkets as their main purchase location. A clear preference for fresh, unprocessed goods is evident, with 81% of respondents frequently buying organic fruits and vegetables. Regarding motivations, personal well-being is the dominant driver; 82% of participants cite "Health" as their primary reason for purchase, followed by "Taste and Quality" at 73% and "Environmental Concern" at 65%, confirming that individual benefits currently outweigh altruistic ones in the Portuguese context. However, significant cognitive and economic barriers persist, as 42% of the sample expresses uncertainty regarding the authenticity of organic certifications despite a general familiarity with logos. Most critically, price sensitivity remains the most formidable

obstacle, with 78% of consumers unwilling to pay a price premium higher than one euro, a factor that directly limits purchase frequency and reinforces the observed "attitude-behavior gap".

Fig.5 - *Main results*

Source: Authors` elaboration (2025).

4.2. Discussion of Research Hypotheses

The patterns identified in the descriptive results provide the necessary evidence to evaluate the four research hypotheses proposed for this study. Regarding H1 and H2, the results confirm that health-related and environmental motives are positively associated with organic food consumption. With 82% of participants identifying health and 65% citing environmental concern as primary drivers, it is evident that both personal well-being and ecological impact act as significant motivators within the Portuguese context, thereby supporting both hypotheses.

In contrast, the findings for H3 are more nuanced and are considered only partially supported or inconclusive. While a high level of familiarity with certification logos was reported (75%), a significant 42% of respondents expressed uncertainty regarding the authenticity of these labels. This cognitive doubt, coupled with the fact that 78% of consumers are unwilling to pay more than one additional euro, suggests that familiarity alone does not translate into a robust willingness to pay a high price premium.

Finally, H4 is strongly supported by the observed purchasing patterns. The data reveals a direct link between high price sensitivity and low consumption frequency, as 61% of the sample only purchases organic products sporadically. The one-euro threshold acts as a substantial economic barrier that prevents positive attitudes from resulting in regular purchasing behavior, effectively confirming the existence of the "attitude-behavior gap" in the Portuguese organic food market.

5 CONCLUSIONS, LIMITATIONS, AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study mapped consumer behavior regarding organic food in Portugal, revealing that while there is growing interest in sustainable consumption, the effective adoption of purchasing habits still lacks consolidation, as most consumers purchase these products only occasionally. Individual benefits, with a particular emphasis on health and sensory quality, were confirmed as the fundamental drivers of choice, prevailing over altruistic environmental concerns. One of the main contributions of this work lies in the identification of a persistent gap between positive attitudes and actual purchasing behavior, primarily driven by economic barriers. High price sensitivity stands as the most

critical obstacle to consumption frequency, demonstrating that the cost differential compared to conventional products prevents favorable perceptions from converting into regular habits. Additionally, the study highlights a trust deficit, where a significant portion of consumers expresses uncertainty regarding the authenticity of certifications, even when claiming to be familiar with the logos and identification labels.

The main limitations of this research are related to the sample size and its geographical concentration, as it is composed mostly of Portuguese nationals. The demographic profile obtained reflects a predominantly young and highly educated group, which may not fully represent the diversity of purchasing power and consumption habits of the entire population. From a methodological standpoint, the exploratory and descriptive design focuses on identifying patterns and trends rather than applying formal statistical inference, which limits the ability to determine definitive causal relationships between the analyzed variables.

For future research, it is recommended to use diversified dissemination platforms to obtain a broader and more heterogeneous sample of respondents. The application of inferential statistical methods is suggested to formally test the strength of the associations between motivations, trust, and purchasing behavior. It is also intended to deepen qualitative issues to identify specific strategies to mitigate the identified barriers, namely the lack of in-depth knowledge regarding certification systems. Finally, conducting comparative studies between the Portuguese reality and other European markets with different levels of maturity in the organic sector could provide new insights into how the national context influences consumers' willingness to pay a premium price for these products.

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