INVESTIGATING SOCIALLY RESPONSIBLE FRESH PRODUCE CONSUMPTION: A MALTESE CASE STUDY

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Abstract

Social responsibility is the moral duty of individuals and organisations to act in ways that benefit society rather than solely seeking profit. This ideology is reflected in the ESG framework through the 'Social' component, which evaluates how companies interact with employees, communities, and society, including labour rights, workplace safety and fair wages. This study investigates how social responsibility influences consumer behaviour in Malta's fresh produce market, with the aim of identifying the gap between ethical intentions and actual purchasing decisions. There are few studies on the social responsibility of fresh produce consumption, especially in regions that rely on imports and face geographic constraints. To address this lacuna, a mixed-methods approach was used, linking quantitative data from an extensive consumer survey with qualitative perceptions from semi-structured interviews with expert stakeholders. The research uncovers a significant gap caused by consumers' limited understanding of social responsibility, often mistaken for the heuristic of 'buying local'. The findings suggest that the intention-behaviour gap does not stem from weak ethical beliefs but from structural limitations, such as price sensitivity, convenience-driven habits, and limited information. Despite consumers expressing strong social values, the current food systems restrict their ability to recognise, access, and afford socially responsible choices. Bridging this gap will require institutional reforms that shift responsibility from individual consumers to a market system where ethical options are the most affordable, accessible, and transparent.

Keywords:

Social responsibility, fresh produce, intention-action gap, behaviour, social, farmers, local, barriers, Malta

To Dr Belinda Gambin, who never stopped believing in me and my capabilities.
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Acronyms

CAP	Common Agricultural Policy
CSR	Corporate Social Responsibility
EU	European Union
ESG	Environmental, Social, and Governance
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organisation
FOE	Friends of the Earth
G.A.P.	Good Agricultural Practice
GDPR	General Data Protection Regulation
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
IFAC	International Federation of Accountants
MAFA	Ministry for Agriculture, Fisheries and Animal Rights
MFA	Malta Food Agency
NSO	National Statistics Office
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PRI	Principles for Responsible Investment
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
S-O-R	Stimulus-Organism-Response
SR	Social Responsibility
TBL	Triple Bottom Line
TPB	Theory of Planned Behaviour
UN	United Nations
WCED	World Commission on Environment and Development
WHO	World Health Organisation

1 Introduction

1.1 Background

As sustainability gains traction, modern consumers are becoming increasingly conscious of their choices (Theocharis & Tsekouropoulos, 2025). However, the focus appears to remain on economic or environmental concerns, while the social aspect is often overlooked (Eccles & Klimenko, 2019). The 'Social' pillar of the Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) framework relates to the influence organisations have on, and gain from, their interactions with individuals both within and beyond the organisation, including employees, customers, and broader community groups (Matos, 2020). This pillar is seen in measures that safeguard employee well-being, uphold ethical labour standards, provide adequate skills development, and promote inclusive workplaces. These actions collectively demonstrate an organisation's commitment to operating in a socially responsible manner and to meeting society's expectations (Khaw et al., 2024; Patil et al., 2020).

In this study, fresh produce is defined as newly picked fruits and vegetables that have not been preserved or processed beyond simple handling, such as trimming or washing, in order to preserve nutritional integrity and freshness (De Corato, 2019; Collins Dictionary, n.d.). The consumption of fresh produce has been widely promoted for its health benefits however, these choices may also reflect broader social values (WHO, 2020). Purchasing from local producers is often viewed as an opportunity to promote sustainability, community welfare, and fair labour practices (Pearson et al., 2010; Zepeda & Deal, 2009). Consumer decisions at farmers' markets are influenced by information about the origins of food products, with many driven by the assumption that supporting local producers can benefit agricultural practices and community well-being (Hunt, 2007). Nonetheless, this may not apply to all customers. Carrington et al. (2010) indicated that a significant number of individuals continue to prioritise habit, convenience and cost above ethical concerns.

However, the limited traceability, labelling, and apparent social responsibility of fresh fruits and vegetables, compared to packaged goods, are worsened by the inherent

nature of fresh food (Klarys, 2023; Moser et al., 2011). Van Bussel et al. (2022) argue that consumers often depend on simplified heuristics to navigate information-poor retail environments. Nonetheless, these shortcuts may hide essential truths about labour conditions, supply-chain fairness, and producer pay. Therefore, creating more fair and socially responsible food systems requires understanding how consumers interpret these signals and how closely these impressions align with social responsibility.

1.2 Rationale

Malta serves as an appropriate case for examining socially responsible consumption of fresh produce, given its limited agricultural capacity, considerable reliance on food imports, and distinctive socio-institutional framework. The characteristics are apparent in a market where significant imports of fruits and vegetables often overshadow seasonal local produce. Although the Maltese agricultural sector contributes significantly to the production of a range of seasonal produce, the nation relies heavily on imports (FAO, 2024) to meet year-round consumer demand and compensate for climate constraints and natural resource limitations. As a result, customers can choose both domestic and imported food, creating a complex, yet broad market in which the social implications of consumer decisions are difficult to evaluate. Despite increasing consumer awareness, ethical principles related to social responsibility are often overlooked in everyday purchasing decisions (Carrington et al., 2010).

There has been minimal academic focus on the social responsibility and social aspects of ESG within fresh-produce systems, particularly in small-island contexts. Although awareness of social responsibility in the food sector is gradually rising, social elements such as fair employment practices and local sourcing remain largely unexamined in consumer behaviour studies, unlike environmental concerns (Lusk & McCluskey, 2018). Simultaneously, while the gap between ethical intentions and actual purchasing behaviour is well known in North America and Northern Europe, there is less understanding of how this gap functions in Mediterranean island settings that depend heavily on imported produce, have rich culinary traditions, and are increasingly aware of sustainability issues (Carrington et al., 2014; Vermeir & Verbeke, 2006). The role of institutional arrangements in socially responsible consumption has also been

underexplored in this context, notably in hybrid retail environments where informal markets coexist with formal supply chains (Puljiz, 2024). Gaining insight into these patterns is vital for developing approaches that better reflect consumer values with purchasing habits and improve the social aspects of local agricultural systems (Liu et al., 2020; President's Foundation, 2018). Overall, there remains a limited comprehension of how Maltese consumers perceive social responsibility in the fresh-produce sector, the cues they rely on, and how these factors influence or limit socially responsible behaviour.

1.3 Aim & Objectives

The primary aim of this research is to examine how social responsibility influences consumer behaviour within Malta's fresh produce sector, with a focus on the gap between ethical intentions and actual purchasing decisions. The study seeks to address the following objectives:

1. Assess consumer awareness and interpretation of the 'Social' criteria in the context of fresh produce.
2. Examine which specific 'Social' practices most significantly impact consumer trust and purchasing decisions.
3. Compare consumer preferences across different purchasing contexts to identify where 'Social' factors have the most significant influence.
4. Identify the 'Social' signals that most strongly affect consumer trust, perceived value, and purchase intention.
5. Investigate the intention-behaviour gap between consumers' expressed social values and their real-world purchasing behaviour.
6. Explore behavioural, social, and practical barriers that hinder the translation of socially driven intentions into actual purchases.

This research also seeks to address the subsequent research questions:

1. To what extent do consumers in Malta consider the 'Social' pillar of ESG when selecting fresh produce?
2. Which 'Social' signals most strongly drive purchase intentions for fresh produce?
3. Do stated intentions around 'Social' factors translate into actual purchases, and does this vary by venue?
4. What behavioural, social, and economic barriers prevent consumers from acting on their 'Social' intentions?

1.4 Chapter Overview

Introduction (Chapter 1): emphasises the significance of socially responsible consumption within the ESG framework, with particular focus on the social aspects of purchasing fresh produce. It also sets out the scope of the work, encompassing its aims and objectives.

Literature Review (Chapter 2): provides a thorough overview of pertinent literature on ethical and socially responsible food consumption, the connection between intention and behaviour, and the specific features of Malta's small-island food industry.

Methodology (Chapter 3): details the study design, data collection techniques, and analytical approaches used to assess consumer intentions, perceptions, and behaviours.

Results, Analysis, &Discussion (Chapter 4): presents both quantitative and qualitative findings through statistical and thematic analyses, offering a cohesive interpretation that addresses the intention-behaviour gap and the barriers to socially responsible consumption.

Conclusion (Chapter 5): synthesises the research by highlighting key findings, revisiting the research objectives, and providing recommendations for Maltese stakeholders and future research.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Sustainability, ESG, & Social Responsibility

2.1.1 Sustainability as the Foundational Framework

Over the past forty years, sustainability has become a core principle of business strategy and global development, addressing future challenges by fostering economic resilience and ecological and social integrity (Docx & Belkacem-Nacer, 2024). WCED (1987) first introduced the idea of sustainability in the 'Our Common Future' report, which covers more than just environmental protection. It also includes social equity, economic viability, and various aspects of human well-being, such as clean water and air, health, and education. The report highlighted that sustainability cannot follow a single, uniform model, due to the significant differences in ecological, economic, and social conditions across different contexts (WCED, 1987). Building on this foundation, sustainable development is subsequently understood as the practical process *of "meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs"* (United Nations, 2025). Nations and organisations must prioritise sustainability to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030 (United Nations, 2015). Conceptually, the agenda extends beyond an environmental perspective to encompass how human needs are fulfilled over time (Holden et al., 2014). The capacity to address these human needs while preserving available productive resources is critical to sustainability and, therefore, necessitates aligning economic and social practices with the ecological resources available for human advancement (Thomas et al., 2015).

In corporate environments, the three-pillar sustainability model – environment, social and economic - is often articulated through the Triple Bottom Line (TBL) framework of People, Planet, and Profit, respectively (Docx & Belkacem-Nacer, 2024), whereas the United Nations (2025) defines sustainable development as a balance between environmental concerns, economic progress, and social equality throughout generations. This conceptualisation has influenced corporate expectations to incorporate environmental and social factors alongside financial success (Docx & Belkacem-Nacer, 2024; Miller, 2020). Within corporate discourse, 'Profit' aligns with the

economic pillar, where firms seek to establish resilient and inclusive economies while ensuring profitability through a variety of short- and long-term approaches, with numerous sustainability efforts enhancing rather than detracting from profits (Docx & Belkacem-Nacer, 2024; Kumar, 2024; Miller, 2020). 'Planet' pertains to the environmental pillar dedicated to supporting biodiversity, conserving natural resources and preserving ecosystems while acknowledging both firms' historical contributions to environmental issues and their potential to drive positive change (Kumar, 2024; Miller, 2020).'People' relate to the social pillar, highlighting justice, equity, and overall individual well-being, implemented through involvement with communities, consumers, and employees (Docx & Belkacem-Nacer, 2024; Kumar, 2024). The social component emphasises a strong focus on rights and justice, integrating them into businesses and communities, including equitable employment, inclusive institutions, and universal access to healthcare and education. By supporting locally based economic activity, enabling infrastructure, and fostering participatory governance, it fosters community development (Kumar, 2024).

Sustainability serves as a foundational premise for ESG and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) projects, emphasising the attainment of long-term ecological, social, and financial stability (Docx & Belkacem-Nacer, 2024). Companies contribute to these goals on an organisational level through CSR incentives, fair trade, and labour standards, inclusive hiring, community outreach, and skills development. As a result, these investments improve the quality of life, strengthen human capital and social cohesion, and promote economic stability and sustainable development (Kumar, 2024). Critics argue that many CSR initiatives serve primarily as marketing tactics rather than as genuine agents of change, highlighting that companies often engage in 'greenwashing' to boost their brand image while maintaining unsustainable core business practices (Sustainability Directory, 2025a; Zervoudi et al., 2025). Moreover, there is a significant gap between actual implementation and stated commitments, mainly due to inadequate enforcement mechanisms (Tamvada, 2020). Additionally, even when these initiatives are authentic with CSR efforts typically concentrated in prominent urban areas, their benefits are often unevenly distributed, leaving rural communities and smaller suppliers further along the supply chain frequently neglected (Liu et al., 2020).

2.1.2 Social Responsibility & the Evolution from CSR to ESG

An increasing environmental consciousness among the general public has compelled businesses to look beyond profit maximisation. This shift has led companies to support a green transition and create a more sustainable future (Zhai et al., 2022). Over the past several decades, interest has steadily grown, driven by factors such as global interconnectedness, governance performance, and social responsibility (SR) (Chen, Yu & Gao 2023; Gao, Li & Zou 2022). Social responsibility is an ethical framework that requires individuals and organisations to act in the best interests of society rather than prioritising financial profit (Bénabou & Tirole, 2009; Choudhary, 2025). In early literature, the term 'social responsibility' was used in place of CSR, indicating a time before the widespread acknowledgement of the modern corporation's dominance (Carroll, 1999).

CSR refers to the corporate implementation of social responsibility, encompassing supply chain practices that promote the well-being of employees, communities, and society at large, as well as the voluntary integration of sustainability considerations into corporate strategies (Čertanec, 2019; McGrath & Jonker, 2023). According to the European Commission (2011), the CSR guidelines stipulate that compliance with collective agreements and legislation forms the baseline for responsible practice, while firms are further expected to incorporate consumer, environmental, social, human rights and ethical considerations into their strategies in collaboration with stakeholders. With a fundamental dedication to these principles, it is operationalised through non-financial reporting, codes of conduct, and value statements that formalise and communicate these commitments (Čertanec, 2019). In response to these evolving priorities and the need for systematic evaluation, ESG metrics have emerged as a comprehensive framework. These metrics encompass the elements associated with environmental concerns, social responsibility, and governance that shape corporate decision-making (Armstrong 2020). First introduced in 2004 by the United Nations, ESG serves as a set of precise quantitative metrics for evaluating a company's social responsibility and sustainability performance (Chen, Yu & Gao, 2023; United Nations, 2004).

ESG's structured approach enables analysts and researchers to better assess the impact of social responsibility activities on its operational and financial performance (Zumente & Bistrova, 2021). Over time, the transformation from CSR to ESG frameworks has demonstrated how a values-based approach grounded on ethics and community involvement evolved into a quantifiable model, incorporating standardised criteria for evaluating organisational performance (Passas, 2024; Pajot, 2024). This transition reorients responsible corporate practices from prioritising reputation to a strategic framework focused on long-term success, financial benefits, and market distinctiveness (Pajot, 2024). ESG incorporates sustainability into the fundamental company strategy, reshaping how firms tackle environmental and social issues while augmenting shareholder value, in contrast to conventional CSR, which primarily focuses on voluntary ethical behaviours (Passas, 2024). The paradigm stipulates that businesses must adhere to philanthropy, environmental stewardship, community involvement and equitable labour practices, all of which strengthen stakeholder connections, build trust, and improve brand prestige, thereby reinforcing corporate legitimacy and supporting long-term sustainable development (Bénabou & Tirole, 2009; Eccles & Stroehle, 2018).

2.1.3 Understanding ESG

Due to its evolving nature, the term ESG lacks a conclusive academic definition despite its widespread recognition (Matos, 2020; Wan et al., 2023). The three dimensions that comprise this acronym are typically defined individually. Since these elements are intrinsically interconnected and often function concurrently, their integration results in a lack of defined boundaries (Patil et al., 2020). The concept of ESG aligns with sustainability and originated in responsible investing, encompassing environmental (E), social (S), and governance (G) considerations. ESG operates as a comprehensive framework and modern competitive strategy that enables organisations to systematically evaluate environmental, social, and governance factors in corporate decision-making (Armstrong, 2020; IFAC, 2012; Ribeiro et al., 2023; Wan et al., 2023). A business's reputation is strengthened by regulating corporate decision-making procedures (Wan et al., 2023). The emergence of responsible investing further emphasises this influence, which entails incorporating ESG factors into active

ownership and investment choices (PRI, 2019). Furthermore, as an investment framework, ESG involves assessing an organisation's practices and policies to predict its financial performance (Li et al., 2021). However, stakeholders increasingly expect firms to pursue goals beyond profit, embedding societal and environmental concerns into core strategy rather than treating them as peripheral activities (Ribeiro et al., 2023).

By linking corporate practice to international targets, ESG translates the United Nations' 17 SDGs into business-level procedures that deliver quantifiable environmental and social benefits (Ribeiro et al., 2023; United Nations, 2015). Environmental variables in ESG are key indicators of an organisation's ecological impact. This factor encompasses waste management, pollution prevention, consumption of raw materials, energy use, and sustainable innovations (Matos, 2020; Patil et al., 2020; Peterdy, 2023). Notably, a company's overall environmental footprint is represented by two pivotal indicators: carbon emissions and its impact on climate change (Patil et al., 2020). The Social aspect of ESG denotes the complex relationships between its customers, employees, and other stakeholders within a company and society (Matos, 2020), rigorous compliance with safety regulations, efficient execution of training initiatives, compliance with ethical labour standards, diversity advancements and the company's social responsibility commitment fulfil social expectation (Khaw et al., 2024, Patil et al., 2020). The social impact obligations are also advised to go beyond company walls to their supply chain partners, particularly in developing economies with more lenient labour and environmental regulations (Peterdy, 2023). The final component of ESG, Governance, comprises internal frameworks and controls to ensure transparency through legal compliance and stakeholder involvement (Patil et al., 2020). It incorporates the management of the environmental and social elements, including corruption and bribery mitigation, board structure and composition, executive remuneration, lobbying activities and sustainable strategic governance and compliance (Deckelbaum et al., 2020). Together, these approaches provide a comprehensive perspective on a company's sustainability endeavours and broader social advantages (Matos, 2020; Peterdy, 2023). These principles of this continually evolving framework are altering the microeconomic dynamics of supply and demand (Becchetti et al., 2022). Nevertheless, there is an academic disparity in research on ESG pillars, with environmental practices

predominantly emphasised, alongside economic and governance issues, while the social pillar is comparatively underexplored (Ribeiro et al., 2023).

2.1.4 Linking Social Responsibility to the 'S' in ESG

Baid & Jayaraman (2022) and Paužuolienė & Derkach (2024) state that short and long-term planning should prioritise workplace ethicse. According to Becchetti et al. (2022), this pillar primarily focuses on the internal and external relational 'inter-subjectivity' of a company, highlighting the network of relationships that shape its social presence. Strong social practices are viewed by investors as a sign of long-term value creation and successful risk management (Eccles & Stroehle, 2018).

Consumers and investors alike are increasingly favouring businesses that actively promote environmental and societal well-being (Choudhary, 2025). When integrated into established standards, these practices may be systematically evaluated, fostering transparency, continuous development, and alignment with the expectations of investors and stakeholders who prioritise sustainable business practices (Paužuolienė & Derkach, 2024). However, the supply chain for fresh produce encounters substantial social challenges, including low wages for farmers, migrant labour, and inadequate safety standards, which often clash with declared corporate ESG commitments (Oxfam International, 2024). In the absence of proper verification procedures, companies may claim to meet social responsibility standards, even when serious violations remain within lower levels of their supply chains (Hana & Tarik, 2025). Beyond ethical obligations, effective human resource management and community engagement improve worker morale and productivity and build stakeholder trust.

2.2 Understanding Socially Responsible Food Consumption

2.2.1 Defining Socially Responsible Food

The term 'socially responsible food' refers to production and consumption methods that align with broader social and environmental values, driven by increasing public concern for social and labour standards across the food supply chain. These methods entail reducing food transportation, ensuring fair labour practices, and promoting sustainable agriculture. Consumers are increasingly valuing these qualities, which include fairness,

workplace safety, labour rights, equitable wages, and non-discrimination (Baid & Jayaraman, 2022; McCluskey et al., 2009; Paužuolienė & Derkach, 2024). Agricultural labour is often recognised as hazardous, marked by low pay, unsafe conditions, and the insecurity faced by seasonal and migrant workers (Beutler & Schmidt, 2016; Hurst et al., 2005). Persistent issues of dangerous working environments and exploitation in global supply chains emphasise the need for stronger worker rights and better oversight within social responsibility frameworks. The movement also advocates supporting local food, based on the belief that locally produced items are healthier, fresher, and more energy-efficient, and that they help strengthen local economies (Harmon, 2022). Ultimately, these trends demonstrate society's broader effort to reshape food systems into more ecologically and socially responsible models. The EAT-Lancet Commission's recent research (2025) builds on earlier sustainability frameworks by supporting the concept of a "just" food system and emphasising social justice throughout food supply chains, in addition to dietary health and environmental limits. This perspective stresses topics such as equitable working conditions, access, and distributional justice, underlining the relevance of the social side of sustainability in contemporary debates regarding food systems.

The local food movement has emphasised social aspects alongside the environmental benefits of shorter food journeys, reflected in the rise of outlets that are directly accessible to consumers, including community-supported agriculture schemes and farmers' markets, driven by increasing consumer interest in sustainability, transparency, and closer ties with producers (Harmon, 2022). Supporting local producers is linked to stronger community economies, sustainable farming practices, and greater consumer trust. Direct interactions enable individuals to enquire about production methods, enhancing the sense of place and community connection while allowing producers to keep a greater portion of the sale and attain a fairer income (Brain, 2012; Gerini et al., 2025; SAN, 2024).

Collective actions challenge the dominant agro-industrial food systems, which prioritise cost efficiency and often impose social and economic burdens on small producers, farmers and marginalised communities. The concept of social responsibility in food systems encompasses multiple interconnected elements, including food governance,

promoting community engagement, ensuring fair pay, supporting the sustainability of small and family farms, and ensuring dignified working conditions.

2.3 Trust Signals & Verification Mechanisms

A significant knowledge gap exists in the modern food market, as consumers often lack awareness of the origins of the food they eat. This issue is apparent for products with environmental, social, and ethical qualities that are not readily apparent. These foods are often considered 'credence goods,' indicating that consumers may find it challenging to verify important attributes after purchase or consumption (Moser et al., 2011). Trust plays a vital role in shaping consumer choices related to food consumption and purchasing (Truong et al., 2021). Therefore, consumers depend on indicators since attributes of credibility, such as certification, farmer safety, or provenance, are difficult to assess directly (Moser et al., 2011). Buyers evaluate and compare food quality using readily available, dependable information, including intrinsic attributes and outward cues from vendors (Moser et al., 2011; Schrobback et al., 2023). These items need verification through assessments or certifications from credible entities, such as government bodies or reputable companies (Moser et al., 2011). Zhang et al. (2015) assert that this customer trust may be fostered through direct interactions or strong institutional frameworks. Therefore, customer trust is essential, given this knowledge disparity, since consumer choices mostly rely on the credibility of the information provided, in the absence of direct evidence.

2.3.1 Labels & Certification

The most notable institutional response to the information asymmetry in credence products is the use of labels and certificates, which act as reliable signals that reduce perceived risk for the buyer by transforming complex manufacturing requirements into an easily recognisable brand (Wu et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2015). Producers can significantly influence customer decision-making by adding certified features to their products through independent organisations' reviews (Brach et al., 2017).

Third-party certification labels are vital tools for marketers and lawmakers seeking to boost consumer trust in food claims that are otherwise hard to verify, as their primary purpose is to serve as a trusted indicator that enhances a product's credibility (Truong et al., 2021). These signals influence consumers' purchasing choices by enabling them to categorise a product and assign a level of legitimacy it might not otherwise have (Brach et al., 2017). A structured system based on a reputable ethical standard requires clear, objectively defined criteria, strict, globally consistent audit processes with enforceable compliance, and effective communication through recognisable branding, according to Baines & Davies (2007). A credible ethical standard is not an arbitrary label. Such standards must also be regularly reviewed to stay relevant.

Since its introduction in 1988, Fairtrade certification has played a crucial role in increasing the significance of various agri-food exports from developing countries (Deines, 2022; Knößlsdorfer et al., 2021). The Fairtrade standard aims to improve the social and economic conditions of smallholder farmers by ensuring a minimum price and providing an additional bonus to promote community development (Baines & Davies, 2007; Fairtrade International, 2018; UNCTAD, 2020). Consumers who purchase products that enable producers and workers to maintain dignified and honourable livelihoods are also supporting fair trade. The primary aim of the Fairtrade movement is to reform trade policies to promote equality and improve the lives of marginalised farmers (Deines, 2022; Fairtrade International, 2018).

Although certification can help consumers better understand the history of the products they purchase, the widespread use of certificates has also created a significant issue. Customers may struggle to make well-informed decisions due to the numerous third-party labels, each with their own requirements. In this context, the certification label might inconsistently become just another credential that buyers struggle to assess. (Brach et al., 2017). Research has shown that customer trust in the overall labelling system can erode quickly due to distrust in certifiers, underscoring that a label's effectiveness depends on the integrity of the mechanisms that support and verify its claims, not just on its presence on packaging (Truong et al., 2021).

2.3.2 Traceability Systems

The credibility of an ethical claim fundamentally depends on the mechanisms that maintain its integrity, rather than on mere labelling (Baines & Davies, 2007). Therefore, traceability systems improve supply chain transparency and product origin verification, acting as additional trust mechanisms (Henderson et al., 2011; Nunes et al., 2021). These technologies aim to enhance transparency and accountability within supply chains, from geographic origin labelling to monitoring systems (Bosona & Gebresenbet, 2013). Transparent and verifiable procedures that link the final product on the shelf to its source are essential for genuine accountability (Nunes et al., 2021). The European Union's regulatory framework mandates that fresh fruit and vegetables be tagged with their country of origin to promote traceability and transparency in food markets (Members Research Service, 2024). Even though origin information does not immediately reflect inherent product quality, EU regulation, specifically Regulation (EU) No 1169/2011 and its Implementing Regulation (EU) 2018/775, requires disclosure when a product's origin differs from that of its major constituent in response to increased consumer interest in source information (European Commission, 2015).

Alongside traditional institutional frameworks, new forms of transparency are emerging within direct-to-consumer models, where initiatives such as homegrown food and farmers' markets introduce more direct, personal verification methods (Wu et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2015). In specific contexts, especially regarding social responsibility, traceability can document fair wage payments, link products to identifiable producer cooperatives, or provide biographies and narratives of farmers to build consumer trust (Starbird & Amanor-Boadu, 2007). However, traceability alone does not guarantee social responsibility - it must be combined with verified labour standards. Studies suggest that information about origin and producer stories enhances perceived authenticity and strengthens consumer-producer relationships, particularly when complemented by visual or biographical elements that personalise otherwise abstract supply chains (Nunes et al., 2021). Without additional evidence confirming ethical practices at the point of production, a product's traceable origin to a specific farm or region does not inherently ensure fair treatment (Casey, 2023; Sustainability Directory, 2025b).

2.4 Intention-Behaviour Gap

2.4.1 Theoretical Frameworks

Understanding why consumers struggle to turn ethical intentions into purchasing behaviour requires theoretical frameworks that clarify the links between attitudes, intentions, and actions. Conceptual frameworks provide vital insights into the leading causes and influencing factors involved. Two complementary frameworks notably shape the ethical consumption literature, each illuminating different facets of the intention-behaviour relationship: The Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) and the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) framework (Asl & Khoddami, 2022; Panda et al., 2020; Sultan et al., 2021). These various perspectives elucidate the reasons for the existence of gaps and the influence of contextual factors on the relationship between intention and behaviour, and provide a framework for examining socially responsible consumption of fresh produce in Malta.

2.4.1.1 The Theory of Planned Behaviour

In 1991, Ajzen developed the TPB, which postulates that attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control jointly determine behavioural intentions, which in turn affect actual behaviour (Figure 2.1). Intentions reflect the motivational factors that drive actions, indicating how much effort individuals are willing to invest. Stronger motives generally increase the likelihood that behaviour will be performed (Ajzen, 1991). The reasoned action tradition proposes that behavioural intentions stem from individuals' evaluations of the behaviour and the social influences they perceive in relation to it (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010). In the TPB, intentions are shaped by perceived behavioural control, which denotes an individual's evaluation of their capacity to carry out the action (Ajzen, 1991). This assessment is heavily influenced by contextual factors, such as time pressures, product availability, and shelf visibility during the purchasing process, which hinder the translation of intention into action.

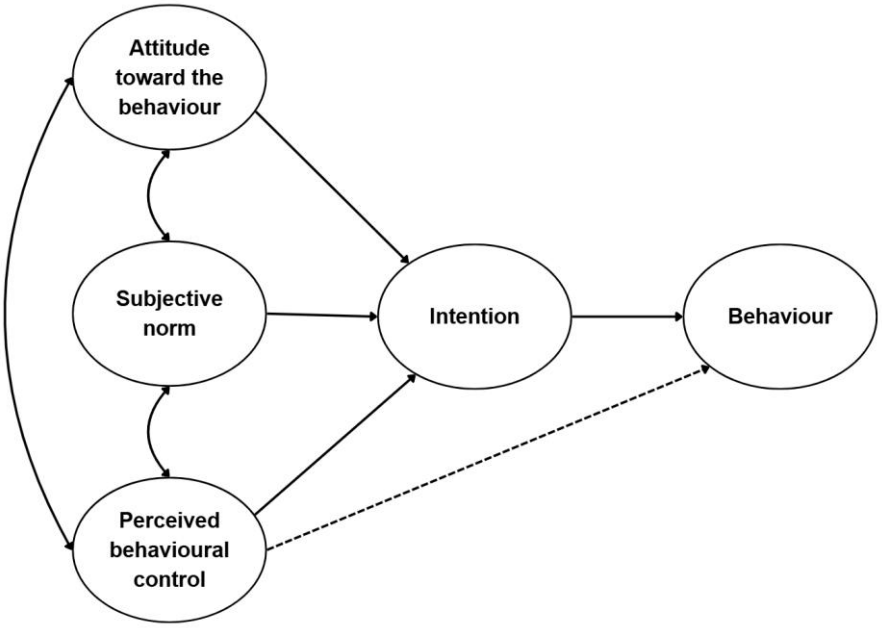


Figure 2.1: Theory of Planned Behaviour flow diagram.

[Source: Author's compilation based on Ajzen (1991).]

As a vital framework, TPB emphasises the intentional and rational aspects of human behaviour. Bazhan et al. (2024) note that recent research has expanded on this foundation by adding other determinants, including health consciousness, sustainable consumption, consumer knowledge, convenience, perceived price, and sociodemographic factors. The authors highlight the influence of these factors on intentions toward fresh produce, whilst also noting the lack of research on how these additional variables affect organic purchasing intentions and the mediating role of attitudes in these effects.

Nonetheless, while TPB shows considerable predictive ability, intentions do not always translate into actions, resulting in the intention-behaviour gap (Gardner et al., 2020; Padel & Foster, 2005; Sheeran & Webb, 2016). Substantial evidence suggests that performing the same actions in a consistent environment, such as shopping at the same store at regular times and following the same route, becomes automatic over time. These behaviours are initiated and controlled by automatic cognitive processes (Ouellette & Wood, 1998), and the frequency of prior actions strengthens habit formation, leading to future behaviours that become more automatic and less dependent on conscious decision-making (Gardner et al., 2020). In such situations, the power of habits can override deliberate reasoning at the moment of purchase, leading consumers to favour

familiar stores, pricing cues, and brands, even when these choices conflict with their stated ethical beliefs (Sheeran & Webb, 2016; Triandis, 1980). While stronger intentions generally enable more accurate predictions of behaviour, they are also more stable, less susceptible to change through intervention, and play a significant role in shaping how information is processed (Conner & Norman, 2022). However, they cannot eliminate the structural and contextual factors that contribute to the intention-behaviour gap.

2.4.1.2 Stimulus-Organism-Response

The Stimulus-Organism-Response framework posits that external cues (stimuli) influence individuals' internal cognitive and emotional states (organism) which, thereafter, determine specific behavioural responses (response) (Lee & Yun, 2015; Pan et al., 2024). Internal processing, whether conscious or unconscious, includes perceptions, emotions, judgements, and interpretations that shape behaviour (Hochreiter et al., 2023). The S-O-R model describes stimuli as various internal or external cues, including informational aspects like labels and origin data, physical attributes such as product placement and signage, as well as social factors such as staff interactions and the presence of other consumers, all of which impact an individual's internal state (Donovan, 1982). The organism encompasses multiple internal processes, such as attitudes, emotions, beliefs, perceptions, and motivations (Sultan et al., 2021). The response results in several behavioural outcomes, including making purchases and spending time in a venue, as well as avoidance behaviours such as choosing alternatives, along with related intentions to buy or avoid (Hochreiter et al., 2023).

Researchers increasingly utilise the S-O-R framework due to its comprehensive integration of effective and cognitive factors influencing behaviour, offering a notable advantage over rational-choice models such as the TPB, which primarily emphasise deliberate decision-making (Lee & Yun, 2015). The model incorporates various stimuli, organismic states, and behavioural responses, providing a solid framework for examining the impact of contextual cues on consumer decision-making (Sultan et al., 2021). The limited number of studies, including one on organic food consumption, underscores the significance of the S-O-R framework in local food purchasing. The significant uncertainty surrounding global economic and environmental conditions

emphasises the importance of analysing the impact of ESG-related stimuli on consumer behaviour beyond cognitive mechanisms (Tortosa-Edo et al., 2024).

In ethical consumption research, the S-O-R framework has been applied to examine how retail environments can either encourage or inhibit socially responsible purchasing (Kim & Hall, 2020). Studies indicate that environmental factors associated with ethical traits trigger cognitive and emotional responses in consumers, which in turn affect their buying decisions (Vergura et al., 2019). Importantly, S-O-R research highlights that the same consumer intentions may lead to different behaviours depending on the environmental setting, underscoring how store features influence the link between intention and action (Joshi & Rahman, 2015).

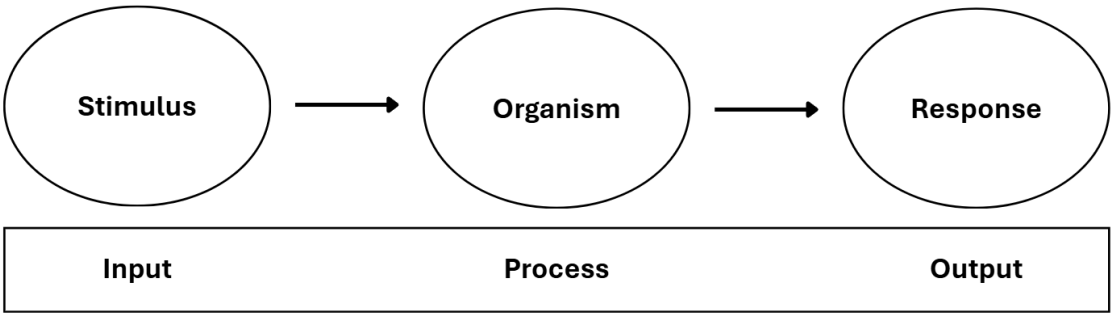


Figure 2.2: Conceptual framework of the Stimulus-Organism-Response model.
[Source: Author's compilation based on Kim et al. (2020)].

2.4.2 Empirical Evidence of the Gap

Across various theoretical frameworks and methodologies, such as those based on the TPB, research consistently reveals a notable difference between customers' actual purchasing behaviour and their expressed ethical intentions. Carrington et al. (2014) demonstrated that ethical intentions often fail to translate into action unless they are explicitly prioritised and reinforced by routines or concrete plans, highlighting a common structural failure in this process. Their case study on avoiding ethical clothing revealed that such intentions accounted for only about 7% of the variance in actual behaviour ($r=0.26$), underscoring the disconnection between intention and practice.

Quantitative evidence shows that this discrepancy remains both persistent and significant, as exemplified by Carrigan and Attalla (2001), who report an 86% gap among UK consumers: 89% express ethical concern but only 3% actually purchase ethical products. Disparities are also evident in sustainable and organic food markets, with Vermeir and Verbeke's (2006) research identifying a 37% gap between intention (67%) and actual behaviour (30%) in sustainable food purchases. Aertsens et al. (2009) also observed that although only 20% purchased organic food regularly, 60% of consumers considered it vital. Research on fair trade indicates a comparable trend showing that only 10% consistently pay the higher price, while 35% of consumers are willing to pay (De Pelsmacker et al., 2005). Even dedicated fair trade advocates face challenges in aligning their expressed preferences with their real behaviour. Longitudinal evidence suggests that the intention-behaviour gap widens over time, as situational constraints at the point of purchase increasingly override pre-existing intentions (Hassan et al., 2016).

The literature provides conflicting evidence regarding the impact of sociodemographic factors, such as age, gender, and education, on reducing the ethical consumption intention-action gap. Demographic factors alone are generally inadequate for accurately predicting consumption behaviour (Aertsens et al., 2009; De Pelsmacker et al., 2005; McCluskey et al., 2009). Although women often exhibit stronger attitudes and intentions towards sustainable products (Vermeir & Verbeke, 2006), research suggests that, in practice, this does not lead to increased ethical purchasing behaviour (De Pelsmacker et al., 2005; Tsalikis & Ortiz-Buonafina, 1990). Furthermore, incorporating motivational factors into predictive models diminishes the initial gender difference in willingness to spend money on goods that are considered to be socially responsible, suggesting that gender may reflect underlying ethical convictions rather than serving as a direct predictor of the link between behaviour and intention (McCluskey et al., 2009).

The findings concerning age reveal inconsistencies - the middle-aged groups (31-44 years) exhibited high commitment and dominance among those that knowingly frequently purchase fair trade products (De Pelsmacker et al., 2005), whilst younger consumers displayed strong positive attitudes without consistently translating these into a higher frequency of ethical purchases, indicating a possible intention-action gap within that demographic (Aertsens et al., 2009). An ethical consumer profile and a

willingness to pay more for ethical products are linked to higher educational attainment. According to external research, higher education and expected ethical buying patterns are strongly and consistently correlated, with educated consumers needing to make fewer financial compromises when making ethical purchases (Aertsens et al., 2009; De Pelsmacker et al., 2005). External evidence shows a strong and consistent link between education and predictable ethical consumption behaviours (Aertsens et al., 2009).

Although this gap is well documented in general consumer research, few studies specifically examine the consumption of fresh produce. The current empirical evidence mainly concentrates on non-perishable, packaged ethical foods, while fresh produce, despite its significant role in household food expenditure, remains relatively underexplored in the literature on the intention-behaviour gap. Moreover, this study aims to address this gap by investigating intention-behaviour discrepancies in Malta's fresh-produce sector and assessing the validity of established patterns in this overlooked product category.

2.4.3 Barriers to Ethical Purchasing

Theoretical frameworks propose that translating intentions into behaviour relies on the presence or absence of facilitating conditions and constraining forces. In ethical consumption literature, substantial empirical research has focused on identifying and characterising the barriers that systematically prevent the translation of pro-social intentions into purchasing behaviour. These obstacles act as structural hindrances rather than individual shortcomings, functioning as mediating variables that affect the intention-behaviour link across different contexts and product categories (Vermeir & Verbeke, 2006). Research highlights three interconnected barriers: economic constraints, behavioural factors and lack of information (Drimie et al., 2025; Sustainability Directory, 2025a). Together, they function as mediating elements that influence the intention-behaviour relationship, with their interaction yielding effects that exceed those of any single barrier.

2.4.3.1 Behavioural Barriers

Despite growing consumer support for ethical and environmental standards, grocery shopping remains a habitual activity influenced by time constraints and ongoing contextual cues. In such situations, habitual behaviour and convenience often take precedence over careful deliberation, weakening the link between intention and action (Sheeran, 2002). The limited availability of produce, especially the irregularity and inconvenience of local outlets and farmers' markets, frequently also hinders consumers from taking action (Gerini et al., 2025; Vermeir & Verbeke, 2006). The TPB proposes that although perceived control may be high during the deliberation stage, it can decrease in-store due to factors including product placement, availability, and minor obstacles (Ajzen, 1991). Habitat formation studies show that automatic cue-response patterns, such as using a consistent store, route, and basket, reduce the influence of pro-social intentions at the shelf (Verplanken & Orbell, 2006). Similarly, an exploration of 'habit' in the context of health-related behaviour indicates that the way choices are presented can significantly shape consumer preferences, often prioritising convenience over social considerations (Gardner, 2015; Johnson et al., 2012).

Social-behavioural barriers often hinder the transformation of intentions into actual purchases. The increasing presence of labels and standards, combined with incidents of greenwashing, may also heighten scepticism and cognitive overload (Delmas & Burbano, 2011; Eppler & Mengis, 2004). Research indicates that consumers' buying choices and price sensitivity, especially for fresh produce, are influenced by various factors, including labelling and certification (Aprile et al., 2012), sensory attributes such as aroma, taste and appearance (Ernst et al., 2006), environmental and health concerns (Boccaletti & Nardella, 2000; Morteza et al., 2009; Onozaka et al., 2010), and support for local farmers (Darby et al., 2008). Although values influence consumers' product preferences, uncertainty often leads them to disregard these values and instead rely on simple cues, such as familiar brands or price, or to prefer the status quo, especially when they believe others are not choosing ethical options (Cialdini et al., 1990). Additionally, the relationship between ethical signals and perceived taste compromises or decreased convenience makes purchase decisions more challenging (Luchs et al., 2010).

2.4.3.2 Economic Barriers

Economic constraints remain the main obstacle to turning social ambitions into actual purchases. Research indicates that although customers are willing to pay more for ethical or organic qualities, factors such as price differences (Aertsens et al., 2011; De Pelsmacker et al., 2005), product category (Krystallis & Chryssohoidis, 2005), and income levels (Gundala & Singh, 2021) all have a substantial impact on actual choices. Customers become less inclined to pay when social responsibility indicators are imprecise or difficult to evaluate (Akerlof, 1970; Roe et al., 2001). According to Canavari et al. (2011), the Maltese market consumes 100,000 tonnes of fresh vegetables and fruit annually. In 2008, Maltese farmers produced 80% of this, but local output has since decreased significantly. Fruit production decreased from 2,694 to 1,989 tonnes, whilst vegetable sales via organised marketplaces declined from 38,542 tonnes in 2012 to 31,453 tonnes in 2022 (Alden, 2023). According to the most recent statistics, crop output fell by 2.6% in 2024 (NSO, 2025), while the agricultural workforce decreased by 26.7% over the preceding decade (Alden, 2023). Nonetheless, the increasing imports of competitively priced, service-enhanced goods are eroding the benefits traditionally enjoyed by small-scale farmers, raising sustainability issues. Simultaneously, in a highly competitive global economy, customers are increasingly demanding quality (Kontogeorgos & Semos, 2008).

2.4.3.3 Information Barriers

Although precise and reliable information is vital in the purchasing process, research consistently shows that many consumers have limited awareness or understanding of a product's true sustainability features (Moser et al., 2011; Van Bussel et al., 2022). As a result, many individuals are unable to make purchasing decisions that reflect their ethical values or fit their financial constraints (Vermeir & Verbeke, 2006). The issue is further complicated by the widespread practice of greenwashing, in which companies use vague terms such as 'eco-friendly' without providing certification or trustworthy evidence (European Commission, 2025a; Sustainability Directory, 2025a). Such practices blur the distinction between genuinely responsible products and those only marketed as ethical, thereby reducing consumer trust. Furthermore, consumers also

often have inadequate knowledge of agricultural production and how their food choices influence broader supply-chain outcomes (Vermeir & Verbeke, 2006).

The lack of detailed product information, challenges in accessing relevant data, and the widespread presence of questionable or insufficient claims significantly hinder ethical purchasing behaviour (Araç & Çabuk, 2023). When faced with uncertainty, people often depend on observing others to determine the most appropriate choice (Vermeir & Verbeke, 2006). The absence of easily accessible, transparent information creates confusion and doubt, preventing individuals from acting on their existing pro-ethical intentions (Padel & Foster, 2005). The complexity of this issue is intensified by the fact that sustainability is a trust-based attribute, meaning consumers must rely on the trustworthiness of information and cannot verify it directly (Vermeir & Verbeke, 2006). To combat the spread of misinformation, in 2023, the European Commission (2025a) adopted the Green Claims Directive proposal to ensure comparability, reliability, and independent verification of environmental claims across the EU. This initiative aims to support informed purchasing decisions and protect consumers from misleading environmental claims. The directive mandates that voluntary environmental claims be transparently managed and independently validated.

Even when accurate information is available, it is often scattered across multiple sources and requires time-consuming verification, a challenge exacerbated by fast-paced lifestyles (Sustainability Directory, 2025a). As a result, establishing the credibility and trustworthiness of environmental labels and claims helps consumers make well-informed decisions. It enhances the competitive advantage of businesses that genuinely improve their sustainability efforts (European Commission, 2025a). For ethical values to effectively influence purchasing choices, consumers need straightforward methods to evaluate the ethical performance of different companies and their products (Carrigan & Attalla, 2001).

2.4.4 Venue Effects on Socially Responsible Food Purchasing

The venues where consumers purchase their produce influence how they interpret and respond to social responsibility claims, as each environment provides unique

informational cues, trust-building opportunities, and dynamics (Feldmann & Hamm, 2014). Structural elements interact with relational factors and informational features, leading to distinct effects across different market types (Zhang et al., 2015). Consumers depend on the perceived reliability of the venue, as well as the various factors within it, to assess credence attributes they cannot verify themselves (Wu et al., 2021). As the distance from producers increases, consumers rely more heavily on intermediaries, making retailers key agents in trust formation through secure transactions, consistent practices, and reputation signals (Wu et al., 2021).

Customers' confidence in farmers' markets remains consistently higher than their trust in other venues, according to a study by Henderson et al. (2011). Instead of relying on institutional validation, direct interaction, producer openness, and conversation opportunities, personal relationships foster trust (Manser, 2022). Farmers' markets are especially reliable places to buy socially-conscious food because they promote 'embedded' trust through monitoring practices and direct communication with producers (Manser, 2022). Notably, consumer confidence in producers is often boosted by the prevalence of local food production rather than formal labelling, which influences purchasing decisions. However, this trust may lead consumers to assume social responsibility without verifying actual labour practices, thus prioritising proximity over substantiated ethical standards (Truong et al., 2021).

Supermarkets rank among the most trusted traditional retail formats, offering continuous availability and secure transactions, fostering consumer trust in food quality and in operators' compliance with standards (Zhang et al., 2015; Wu et al., 2021). Once confidence is established, customers tend to repurchase the same items from their preferred vendor (Ladwein & Sánchez Romero, 2021). Yet, many major stores provide only a limited selection of local products, restricting socially responsible shopping choices (Zahra, 2020). Research indicates that even when supermarkets stock certified fair trade or local items, customers may perceive their authenticity as less genuine than that of products sold directly (Zepeda & Leviten-Reid, 2004).

Organic and health food shops build consumer trust by emphasising certified, ethically produced items, allowing customers to assess product credibility through clear

informational signals and knowledgeable staff (Wu et al., 2021). These retailers help customers navigate products aligned with ethical or environmental principles, and consumers often rely on such specialist venues to incorporate social responsibility across their entire range rather than assessing each product individually (Wu et al., 2021). Although EU organic standards (Regulation 2018/848) ensure strict farm-to-fork traceability and prohibit the use of synthetic pesticides (European Commission, 2025b), they do not require safe working conditions, fair wages, or equitable pay for producers. However, organic products can still be produced under exploitative labour conditions. Many customers remain unaware of these differences and often do not understand the limits of what organic certification guarantees. Consequently, customers frequently equate 'organic' with complete 'ethical' standards, a misconception that these retailers may unintentionally reinforce (Magnano et al., 2024; Schleenbecker & Hamm, 2013). Furthermore, specialised retailers typically command price premiums and have limited geographic coverage, which can restrict access for higher-income consumers and perpetuate socio-economic stratification in ethical consumption capacity (Smoluk-Sikorska et al., 2023).

On the other hand, online food vendors face significant challenges in establishing trust, because customers cannot verify their authenticity in person (Manser, 2022; Zhang et al., 2015). Consequently, they rely on indirect strategies, such as website design, secure payment methods, and user reviews, to compensate for the absence of direct human interaction. As a result, trust in online sellers is often more fragile and takes longer to develop (Wu et al., 2021).

2.5 The Maltese Context

2.5.1 Malta's Fresh Produce Sector

The Maltese fresh produce sector is influenced by localised supply chains and unique production systems, reflecting the island's constrained land resources, fragmented farming structures, and dependence on both traditional and developing distribution networks. Agriculture has shaped civilisations throughout history, influencing community structures and cultural heritage, and driving the development of other

economic sectors, thereby placing it at the core of both sustainable development and human well-being. As a result, agriculture serves as the socio-economic foundation of rural areas where agricultural and food systems continue to provide vital jobs and revenue (Cauchi et al., 2023).

2.5.1.1 Scale

The agricultural landscape in Malta consists predominantly of small-scale holdings, with 96.5% of farms functioning on less than five hectares (European Commission, 2020). The sector, while structurally vital, encounters considerable physical and economic obstacles. These include constrained water resources, strong urbanisation pressures, dependence on imported inputs, fragmented holdings, and a persistent culture of individualism that hampers collaboration (PS-FAAR, 2024). The outlined conditions lead to higher production costs, diminished competitiveness, and reduced farmers' bargaining power within the supply chain (European Commission, 2025a). The fundamental challenge at the heart of these issues is the sector's failure to realise economies of scale, as land fragmentation and the prevalence of independent operating practices limit opportunities for cost efficiency and production consolidation. The structural inefficiency in question significantly diminishes the international competitiveness of Maltese produce, while simultaneously increasing producers' susceptibility to external market pressures (European Commission, 2025a).

Figure 2.3 illustrates a decline in the number of farms, from roughly 12,800 in 2010 to 8,000 in 2020, with average farm size remaining at about 1.5 hectares (Agridata Europa, 2023; NSO, 2022). This decline suggests a process of consolidation while maintaining ongoing small-scale production activities. The total cultivated area was recorded at 10,731 hectares in 2020 (NSO, 2022), highlighting the spatial constraints characteristic of Malta's agricultural landscape. Malta's limited size allows numerous farmers to bypass specific EU regulatory obligations and yet, the nation benefits from the highest average Direct Payment per hectare under the CAP. This situation highlights the sector's susceptibility and the need to acknowledge its inherent structural challenges (Zahra, 2020).

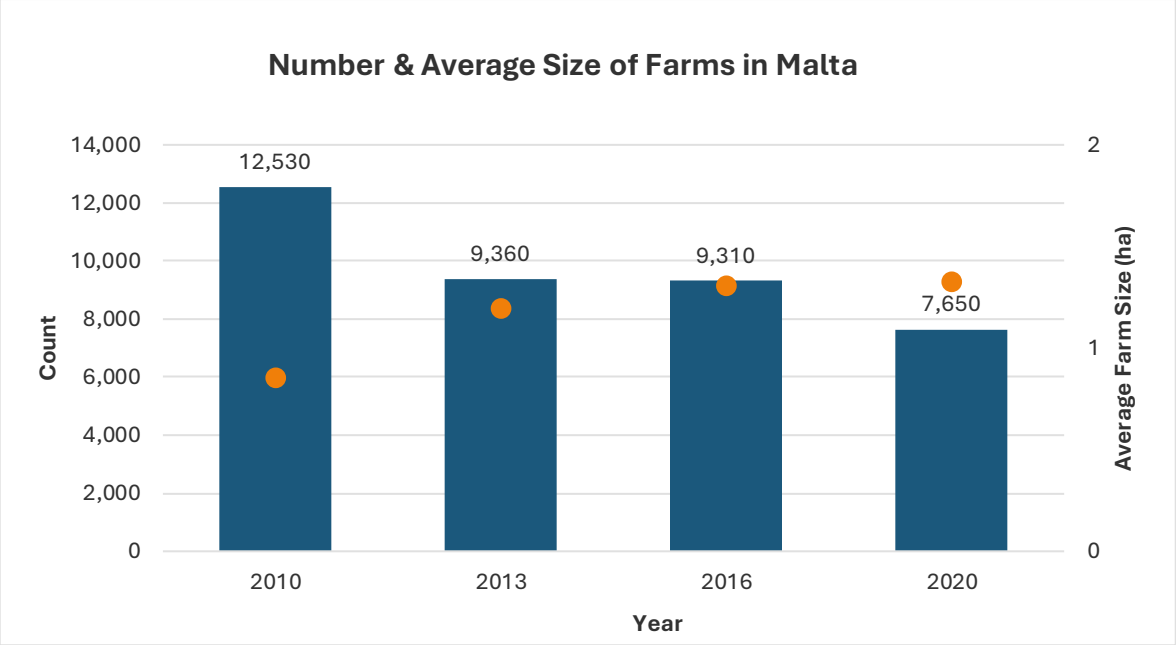


Figure 2.3: The number and average size of farms in Malta between 2010 and 2020.

[Source: Author's compilation based on Agridata Europa (2023) data].

2.5.1.2 Import Dependency

Malta's structural vulnerabilities markedly increase its reliance on external supply chains, as around 70% of its food supply is imported (Central Bank of Malta, 2022). This dependence is crucial for maintaining a steady supply of fresh produce and obtaining necessary raw materials for production (European Commission, 2025a). The considerable growth of the organic market underscores this dependency, as imports rose from 8.8 million to 60 million kilogrammes between 2010 and 2020 in response to increasing domestic demand (MAFA, 2023), posing a serious threat to food security and exposing farmers to rising input costs. The distribution of value added across the food chain demonstrates this reliance on imports, as distribution and consumer services are capturing a growing share of the total system value (MAFA, 2023).

Smart Supermarket indicates that whilst most fruits and vegetables originate from *Pitkalija*, imports are required when local supply is insufficient, particularly for pre-packed and processed products (Zammit, 2025). Due to the limited size of the local market, many imported items do not meet Maltese needs as they conform to the standards of their respective countries (MAFA, 2024). Recent developments indicate significant progress in local sourcing, particularly highlighted by Lidl's partnership with

the Farmer Central Cooperative Society to procure Maltese agricultural products (Fenech, 2025; Galdes, 2025). The interplay of structural, demographic, and economic factors underscores systemic constraints in Maltese agriculture, highlighting its limited capacity to compete with imports or to achieve sustainable output growth.

2.5.1.3 Agricultural Production Systems

In Malta, although the sector contributes a small share to the national economy, representing only 0.21% of GDP in 2024 (Trading Economics, 2025), it still has cultural and social significance. With around 10,400 farms, 90% of which are less than two hectares, spread across approximately 10,700 hectares of agricultural land, the industry is dominated by small and micro-holdings (European Commission, 2025a). However, many farms are run part-time by family members who depend on income from sources other than farming, and micro-farm structures and fragmented parcels make it challenging to compete globally or attain economies of scale (European Commission, 2025a). Nonetheless, EU-wide trends indicate a gradual increase, with farm earnings rising from 31% of average salaries in 2005 to 65% in 2022 (Agridata Europa, 2023). In 2020, farms in Europe occupied 157 million hectares, accounting for nearly 38% of the EU's total territory. Around two-thirds of these holdings were less than five hectares, highlighting the importance of smallholdings in alleviating rural poverty and generating additional revenue (Eurostat, 2022). The geographic distribution of arable land across the islands distinctly underscores Malta's agricultural limitations (Figure 2.4). The ongoing decline in agricultural land is exacerbated by infrastructure expansion, urban sprawl, and the conversion of farmland for other uses (Role et al., 2005). Furthermore, the pressures of rapid urbanisation, population growth, tourism development, and property speculation greatly threaten the availability of agricultural land in Malta (MAFA, 2024). The shrinking agricultural workforce, alongside the decrease in arable land, has consistently weakened the country's ability to produce food locally.

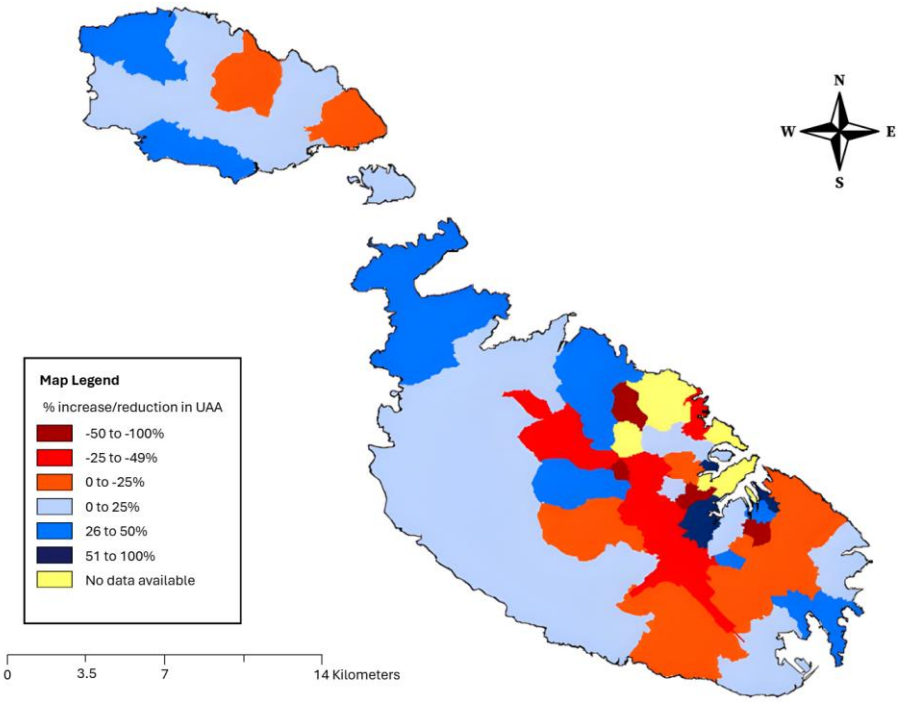


Figure 2.4: An indicative trend of agricultural land use from 1991-2001 (Role et al., 2005).

The sector's farms, farmers, and farmland are essential for economic growth, environmental protection and social well-being, forming the basis that sustains and unites both ecosystems and communities (Cauchi et al., 2023; Zahra, 2020). Concurrently, the multifaceted contributions of local agriculture are gaining recognition, with farmers regarded not merely as producers but also as preservers of cultural heritage and key sources of knowledge on agricultural practices and local food production. Nevertheless, these contributions are threatened by demographic pressures, as Malta has fewer young farmers than the EU average, resulting in an ageing workforce and constrained generational renewal (Borg et al., 2024). Because supporting local farmers can directly impact community livelihoods, generational renewal, and the maintenance of rural traditions, Malta's dispersed, small-scale farming system emphasises the importance of customers' social responsibility.

2.5.1.4 Supply chains

In comparison with larger European nations, the social significance of the *Pitkalija*, farmers' markets, and supermarkets is heightened in Malta due to its small size and geographic isolation, which makes them vital to farmers' livelihoods and food availability. The supply chain significantly influences consumer access to fresh food,

market efficiency, and farmer profitability. As of 2023, the organic agriculture value chain in Malta faces constraints in scale, comprising only 26 producers, 8 processors, and 16 wholesalers in the organic sector, alongside 29 retailers and 38 importers serving consumer demand (MAFA, 2023). The main distribution channel for fresh produce in Malta is the government-operated central wholesale market, *Pitkalija*. The Malta Food Agency (MFA) oversees the national hub, which is responsible for collecting and marketing locally grown vegetables and fruit, and for managing the sale of all produce supplied by registered farmers to marketing agents within the system (MFA, 2025b). This model involves farmers delivering their produce to cooperatives or private intermediaries, who then auction it to retailers and other buyers on a commission basis (Buttiġieġ & Zahra, 2012; FOE, 2017). Registered vendors, including local grocers and supermarkets, can obtain produce immediately after delivery, ensuring a reliable supply of fresh, high-quality items for consumers (MFA, 2025b). Farmers can also sell their products through producer organisations or directly (Buttiġieġ & Zahra, 2012).

Despite playing a vital role in Malta's food system, the *Pitkalija* has faced significant criticism due to systemic flaws including a lack of price transparency and limited traceability, as well as the absence of formal product grading, all of which stem from its reliance on manual transaction processes (Dwyer et al., 2014, as cited in FOE, 2017). The establishment of farmers' markets across Malta has been a direct response to ongoing dissatisfaction with the *Pitkalija* system (FOE, 2017). These markets are crucial in restoring the direct connection between producers and consumers, a relationship many stakeholders believe has weakened over time. The MFA (2025a) recognises two farmers' markets across the country: the Farmers Market in Ta' Qali, which operates on Tuesday and Saturday mornings, and the market in Kottonera, which operates on Saturday mornings. Visitors can find fresh, authentic, and seasonal local food, including fruits and vegetables. These markets are popular because they offer the opportunity to buy fresh products directly from local farmers and producers, enabling access to genuine, local, and fresh food (MFA, 2025a).

A series of reforms is underway to modernise the system, including digital grading and traceability tools to enhance fairness and give farmers direct access to transaction records (FOE, 2017; MFA, 2025b). MFA (2025b) has introduced a new barcode and

electronic recording system for real-time logging of all produce and sales, increasing traceability, and creating a more equitable marketplace. The MFA also launched the 'Żomm Tarmix' initiative in 2025, providing a clear example of the social dimension of ESG in practice (Borg, 2025). The initiative employs a digital platform to connect businesses with near-expiry excess food to voluntary organisations for redistribution. This approach mitigates food waste, supports vulnerable communities, and advances national goals for socially and environmentally responsible food governance, while ensuring an efficient, transparent system and providing tax incentives (Borg, 2025; TVM Newsroom, 2025). Facilitating direct sales from farmers to the public builds trust, improves transparency, and allows producers to tailor their offerings to consumer needs better (Dwyer et al., 2014, as cited in FOE, 2017).

2.5.1.5 Labelling & Certifications

The fresh produce sector in Malta includes international certifications such as Fairtrade and a national scheme named the 'Products of Quality'. As previously mentioned, the Fairtrade Mark remains the most globally recognised ethical certification. Items bearing this label comply with established economic, environmental and social Fairtrade Standards, differentiating them from non-certified goods throughout the supply chain and guaranteeing full traceability of ingredients from source to finished product (Fairtrade International, 2018). When consumers select Fairtrade-labelled items, they help enhance farmers' and workers' livelihoods and support community development (Deines, 2022).

The 'Products of Quality' Scheme is a voluntary program recognised by the EU that grants a quality mark to producers and operators within approved agricultural value chains who comply with specified production, processing, and traceability standards, ensuring consumers receive products of exceptional quality and precise origin (Rural Affairs, 2025). While the scheme guarantees product quality, origin, and regulatory compliance, it does not assess labour conditions or other social criteria related to ESG. The absence of formal social assurance in Malta's fresh-produce sector emphasises the need to explore how consumers rely on non-certified, transparency-based signals, such as

farmer origin stories, wage information, or transparent pricing structures, when evaluating social responsibility in the marketplace (Milidoni, 2024).

2.5.2 Existing Maltese Research

Although the existing literature thoroughly examines the intention-behaviour gap, there is a noticeable lack of research on socially responsible consumption of fresh food, particularly in the Maltese context. Current agricultural studies tend to focus on policy frameworks, structural constraints, and production systems, leaving a gap in understanding consumer behaviour and purchasing choices. A survey conducted by FOE (2017) in Malta revealed significant consumer interest in local provenance and transparency. Nearly 75% actively checked labels to verify growing locations and more than 80% of respondents showed interest in the origin of produce, with over 60% feeling there was insufficient information available about the sources of fruits and vegetables. Yet, it remains empirically unexamined whether this expressed interest consistently translates into a preference for purchasing ethically or locally sourced produce.

Although research on Maltese food consumption patterns has examined nutrition and health, outlining Malta's shift from the Mediterranean diet to Western eating habits (Mizzi, 1994; President's Foundation, 2018), these studies concentrate on nutritional epidemiology rather than the ethical aspects of food choice. Likewise, although Malta is included in wider studies on EU agricultural surveys and Mediterranean diet adherence, these analyses do not address intention-behaviour gaps or focus on social responsibility criteria specific to the Maltese context.

A consumer study examined perceptions and purchasing behaviour relating to animal welfare in food products among 384 Maltese respondents (Bonanno, 2025). The study confirmed internationally observed trends: although 64% indicated that animal welfare influenced their purchasing choices, yet only 49% were willing to pay higher prices for animal-friendly products, with most limiting their willingness to a 10% increase. The study clearly highlighted a gap between ethical considerations and actual buying habits, emphasising cost as the main barrier to ethical purchasing. Despite the fact that 84% of respondents supported introducing a national animal welfare label, showing a readiness

to adopt transparency measures, overall knowledge of welfare issues was only moderate, and the mass media was identified as the primary source of information.

Significant knowledge gaps persist, with no studies specifically exploring how Maltese consumers perceive and interpret social responsibility in relation to fresh produce consumption. It remains unclear whether the intention-behaviour gaps observed in continental European contexts are similarly evident in Malta's small, import-dependent market.

2.6 The Research Gap

Although European research on ethical food consumption is increasing, significant gaps persist in understanding socially responsible purchasing of fresh produce in small island, import-dependent contexts. No empirical research has been conducted in Malta to explore how consumers perceive social responsibility in buying fresh produce or to determine whether the intention-behaviour gaps seen in other parts of Europe exist in Malta's unique market environment. The 'Social' pillar of the ESG framework, which includes human rights, supply-chain equity, working conditions, and governance transparency, offers a useful way to place ethical consumerism within broader discussions on social sustainability (Ribeiro et al., 2023). This social aspect of agrifood systems is increasingly viewed as essential, encompassing not only employment rights but also food safety, cultural acceptability, equitable value distribution, traceability across the supply chain, and quality of life (Toussaint et al., 2021). Island economies, such as Malta, that are heavily reliant on imports, should focus on maintaining fair terms for international producers, ensuring transparency in imported products, supporting domestic agricultural producers where feasible, and safeguarding consumer rights. This research goes beyond perspectives on ethical consumerism that focus solely on origin or environmental factors. It aims to provide a comprehensive view of the social responsibility of fresh produce by examining how much Maltese consumers consider the conditions of farmers and supply chain workers when making purchasing decisions. Therefore, this study aims to address these gaps by examining how social responsibility, as conceptualised within ESG's social dimension, influences consumer behaviour in Malta's fresh produce sector, with a focus on the gap between ethical intentions and

actual purchasing decisions. The next chapter details the methodological approach used to explore these questions.

3 Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the research approaches and theoretical frameworks employed to explore the underlying social and contextual factors that influence socially responsible consumption and the extent of the intention-behaviour gap. It also details the research process, including study strategy, sampling procedures, data collection, and analysis techniques. A mixed-methods approach was adopted to capture both quantifiable consumption patterns and the subjective meanings that consumers attach to socially responsible food practices.

3.2 Mixed-Methods Design Rationale

According to Creswell and Plano Clark (2011), incorporating multiple research techniques offers benefits, such as enabling researchers to leverage the strengths of one approach to counteract the drawbacks of the other, thereby generating more credible and robust findings. The blend also enables the investigation of complex research enquiries that may be unanswerable through a single approach. Additionally, mixed methods foster interdisciplinary collaboration and embrace diverse perspectives, promoting a multifaceted understanding of the research topic through various paradigms and viewpoints.

The use of a single data collection method may be deemed inadequate to address the study's aims and objectives, combining qualitative and quantitative data yields insights that surpass those from either data type alone (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Plano & Ivankova, 2016). It grants a more comprehensive understanding by integrating a wider range of complementary or divergent perspectives while leveraging the strengths of each method to mitigate their respective shortcomings, leading to a more thorough study (Dawadi et al., 2021; Plano & Ivankova, 2016). Thus, employing this methodology not only strengthens the reliability and validity of the results (Hesse-Biber, 2010) but also deepens understanding of the phenomena, fosters more profound thought, and offers new opportunities for future research (Dawadi et al., 2021).

3.3 Research Design

3.3.1 Mixed-Methods

The convergent parallel mixed-methods design was identified to utilise the benefits of quantitative and qualitative data for in-depth research analysis (Figure 3.1). A hallmark of this design is the preliminary independence of datasets, with data analysis performed individually for each before amalgamation (Guest & Fleming, 2015). Also known as parallel or concurrent designs, this procedure enables researchers to compare quantitative and qualitative results, thereby gaining a more comprehensive understanding. The above methodology facilitates the researcher to investigate the correlation between consumers' expressed intentions and their actual behaviours when purchasing socially responsible fresh produce while concurrently obtaining comprehensive insights from key informants with expertise in the subject. The quantitative portion of the study comprises a consumer questionnaire to measure patterns of awareness, behaviour, and intention in socially responsible fresh-produce consumption. The qualitative section incorporates semi-structured interviews, which can provide a more in-depth comprehension of the components that may influence customers' decisions.

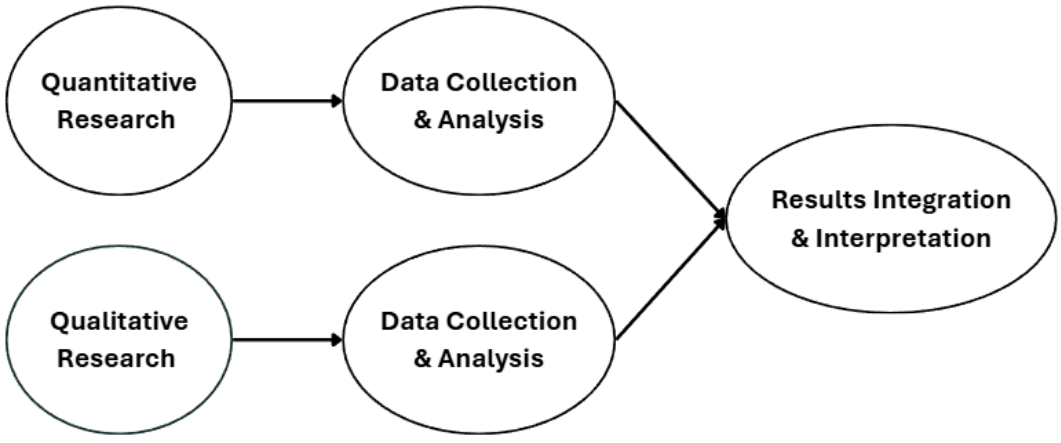


Figure 3.1: Flowchart of convergent parallel mixed-method design.

[Source: created by author].

By integrating the benefits and constraints of the methodologies, the results can be cross-validated, and participant responses across open-ended qualitative questions

and structured quantitative scales can be assessed, enabling the integration of quantitative statistical results with qualitative insights for a more thorough comprehension (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). The dataset is analysed independently, and the findings are integrated through triangulation, enhancing the reliability and credibility of the study's conclusions and thereby reducing the likelihood of incomplete or incorrect interpretations linked to any specific data source or methodology (Gibson, 2017; Guest & Fleming, 2015).

The framework of this study's convergent mixed-methods design was developed to ensure that each research question is explored through a complementary methodological perspective:

Research Question 1 investigates, through an online questionnaire, how consumers in Malta interpret the 'Social' component of ESG when purchasing fresh produce and evaluates their awareness and prioritisation of socially responsible attributes. Interviews provide depth by elucidating the contextual importance of viewpoints and policies regarding consumer engagement with social responsibility in food systems.

Research Question 2 aims to understand the social signals that significantly influence purchase intentions, utilising statistical analysis of consumer preferences and ranking behaviours from the questionnaire. The interview portion of the study can provide an additional interpretive dimension by elucidating how signals are contextualised or understood within policy and retail, and whether they align with genuine consumer motives observed in real-world situations.

Research Question 3 addresses the conversion of expressed intentions into actual purchases and whether this conversion process varies across different retail environments. The questionnaire yields self-reported behavioural data, whereas the interviews elucidate this by examining situational and structural factors that affect customer follow-through across settings. Conversely, the interviews will contextualise these results by identifying systemic aspects that may influence conduct across various locations.

Lastly, **Research Question 4** examines the obstacles that hinder consumers from acting on their intentions through a quantitative assessment of perceived barriers, complemented by qualitative data that elaborates on the overarching structural, cultural, and economic impediments from both governmental and market viewpoints.

This mixed-methods approach ensures that each research question is investigated using the most appropriate data type, yielding a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of socially responsible consumerism.

3.4 Data Collection Methods

3.4.1 Quantitative Research

As part of the mixed-methods approach, numerical quantitative data were gathered through an online questionnaire, intended to capture trends and attitudes among the Maltese community. It is often used to evaluate hypotheses and to investigate relationships among variables, which are then assessed using statistical software to achieve valid and reliable outcomes (Guest & Fleming, 2015; Lim, 2024). Quantitative research also enhances the extrapolation of findings to larger populations, thereby improving generalisability (Sreekumar, 2023). It also enables faster, more cost-effective data collection through automated methods (Lim, 2024).

3.4.1.1 Target Population & Sampling Strategy

The quantitative component's objective is to gather input from a diverse sample of Maltese society to assess the average consumer's awareness, attitudes, intentions, and self-reported behaviours when purchasing fresh produce. Moreover, persons aged 18 years or older living in Malta were chosen to represent the public's perceptions and expectations, since they are frequent consumers of these products (European Commission, 2021). This study implemented a non-probability sampling methodology, integrating elements of snowball sampling and convenience sampling (Etikan, 2017).

Though it may be deemed as a less desirable sampling method, non-probability sampling is appropriate in this case because there is the inability to reliably ascertain the likelihood of a participant's inclusion, regardless of any applied randomisation, or the absence of random selection in the sample (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Etikan, 2017; Kim, 2022). Nevertheless, this approach is suitable for exploratory research, where the generation of participant insights typically takes precedence over generalisability (Ahmed, 2024). In these contexts, prioritising depth of understanding may necessitate a transparent and well-justified rationale for participant selection (Taherdoost, 2016).

Convenience and snowball sampling methods were employed to recruit participants for the quantitative phase as they are suitable for accessing diverse consumer groups while optimising time and resources (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Convenience sampling involves the selection of individuals who are easily available and accessible. This method is often favoured for its cost-effectiveness, quick execution, and ease of implementation, particularly in student research and preliminary studies (Ahmed, 2024; Taherdoost, 2016). It was selected for the study's survey phase because of its effectiveness in recruiting Maltese residents aged 18 and older who frequently consume fresh produce. Although data collection is efficient and economical, it is prone to selection bias and frequently produces non-representative samples, which restricts the generalisability of the findings (Ahmed, 2024).

On the other hand, snowball sampling involves existing participants recruiting additional participants from their networks, proving particularly effective for accessing hidden or hard-to-reach populations (Sharma, 2017). This technique was particularly relevant for expanding the survey's outreach beyond immediate university networks and enhancing participation from the general public. This sampling approach is often utilised when a definitive sampling frame is lacking and is particularly effective in building trust and encouraging participation (Ahmed, 2024). Snowball sampling is characterised by its time-consuming nature and vulnerability to bias due to non-random participant selection and reliance on initial contacts (Etikan, 2017; Taherdoost, 2016). These sampling techniques provided a practical, effective strategy for recruiting participants and collecting relevant consumer data in the absence of a national sampling framework.

As of July 2025, an estimated 347,000 Maltese nationals aged 18 or older comprise the total population of 545,405 (Migliore, 2025). Using the standard formula (1) for a finite population (Taherdoost, 2016), the necessary sample size for this study was determined with a 5% margin of error (e=0.05), a 95% confidence level (Z=1.96), and an assumed population proportion of 50% (p=0.5, to allow for maximum variability) and the population size (N) of 347,000.

$$n=\left[\frac{\frac{z^2+p(1-p)}{e^2}}{\frac{1(z^2+p(1-p))}{e^2*N}}\right] \quad (1)$$

$$n=\left[\frac{(347{,}000\times 1.96^2\times 0.5\times 0.5)}{(0.05^2\times(347{,}000-1)+1.96^2\times 0.5\times 0.5)}\right] \quad (2)$$

Therefore, a sample of 384 Maltese citizens (2) aged 18 and older was required to achieve a 95% confidence level with a ±5% margin of error.

3.4.1.2 Instrumentation & Survey Design

A cross-sectional survey design was selected to collect objectively verifiable data, utilising the online survey platform Microsoft Forms to expedite and enhance the data collection process (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Dawadi et al., 2021). This aspect incorporates both descriptive and correlational elements, aimed at encapsulating trends in fresh produce consumption behaviours and exploring the interconnections between attitudes, intentions, and actual practices (Bhandari, 2020). Although this survey may provide valuable insights, the qualitative portion of this study may offer a significant understanding in contexts where quantitative data are insufficient (Guest & Fleming, 2015).

Following established survey design protocols (Dillman, 2007, as cited in Creswell & Creswell, 2018), the online questionnaire, structured to require approximately six to eight minutes for completion, was systematically organised into four distinct sections: ‘Demographics’, ‘Fresh-Produce Purchasing Habits’, ‘Values, Attitudes, and Intentions’ regarding socially responsible consumption, and ‘Actual Behaviour, Perceived Barriers, and Trust’. The instrument began with an introductory page that explained the research’s

goal and informed participants that by initiating the survey, they were granting permission for their participation and the use of their data in the study. A combination of multiple-choice questions, ranking tasks, importance and frequency assessments, Likert-type scales, and a few open-ended responses was employed to gather both behavioural data and attitudinal metrics, concluding the questionnaire with a succinct closing remark. This approach facilitated the acquisition of both quantitative and restricted qualitative data, achieving a balance between depth and analytical simplicity.

3.4.1.3 Theory of Planned Behaviour

As detailed in Chapter 2, the TPB asserts that behavioural intentions are impacted by attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control, which serve as predictors of behavioural intention (Ajzen, 1991). It asserts that human activity is motivated by a deliberate desire to do a particular action (Bazhan et al., 2024). Behavioural Intentions are maximised when social pressures are supportive, attitudes are favourable, and there is a strong sense of perceived control over conduct (Bosnjak et al., 2020). Thus, this framework was employed to comprehend consumers' purchasing intentions regarding fresh produce.

Each concept is implemented within the questionnaire. The survey operationalises attitudes through questions that uncover respondents' perceived benefits, such as health perks, and drawbacks including inconvenience or cost, associated with purchasing socially responsible fresh produce (Brookes 2023). Subjective norms were assessed through enquiries that reveal the felt social pressures from family, friends, or peers to engage in or abstain from purchasing ethically produced goods (Ajzen, 1991). Lastly, perceived behavioural control was evaluated using questions that examined both external aspects, involving time, availability and price, as well as internal elements, such as confidence in recognising ethical tags, which influence respondents' ability to act on their intentions (Bazhan et al., 2024). The aforementioned sets of items, determined through Likert statements in the questionnaire, are associated with self-reported behavioural frequency and contribute to intention measures. This framework facilitates regression and mediation analyses to examine the intention-behaviour gap in socially responsible consumption of fresh produce.

3.4.1.4 Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) model

The SOR Model is a framework developed by Mehrabian and Russell in 1974 that seeks to investigate the origins and formulation of decisions, as well as to identify customers' behavioural and mental thought processes (Yu et al., 2024). It states that the external environment influences both conscious and unconscious internal perceptions and emotions, thereby affecting an individual's decisions and behaviours (Hochreiter et al., 2023). Decisions and behaviours are driven by individuals' internal emotional and cognitive states, which guide their subsequent actions (Pan et al., 2024).

In this study, the three-stage model is conceptualised as follows: the Stimulus refers to observable signals that convey social responsibility, such as reputation cues, third-party certifications, and product labelling. The *Organism* refers to the internal processing of such cues, as measured by questions assessing respondents' confidence in the seller, perceived legitimacy of ethical statements, and their emphasis on social responsibility. This model was assessed using survey elements, measuring perceived credibility, value alignment, and trust, with Likert-scale questions. Lastly, the reaction is operationalised as the consumer's decision to purchase, measured through self-reported purchase frequency and intention statements. This framework facilitates path-model analyses to evaluate the influence of specific stimuli on internal perceptions, which in turn, predict purchasing intentions (Song et al., 2024).

3.4.1.5 Data Collection Procedure

Data for this study were collected via a self-administered, standardised online questionnaire hosted on Microsoft Forms[1]. The anonymous survey was distributed via a recruitment link through convenience and snowball sampling on online channels, including social media platforms and the University of Malta's mailing lists, as well as respondent-driven sampling. Online platforms were utilised to collect data, enabling broad, rapid dissemination of the survey at a lower cost and access to a diverse participant population within a limited timeframe (Kim, 2022). To maximise response rates, the survey remained open for four weeks, with reminder notices sent on weeks 2

[1] Appendix B.

and 3. As reiterated at the beginning of the questionnaire, participation was entirely voluntary, and respondents had the option to withdraw from the study at any moment. Before disseminating the questionnaire, the instrument was pilot-tested with 10 participants from the target demographic to evaluate completion time, assess question clarity, and confirm technical functionality. Minor tweaks were made according to the feedback. Once the time-frame for the questionnaire closed, all responses were automatically timestamped, exported into Excel, and saved on a safe, password-protected device. The data cleansing procedure included removing items lacking permission and discarding records with more than 50% of the survey incomplete. After cleaning, the dataset was prepared for analysis by importing it into SPSS for variable recoding and labelling.

3.4.2 Qualitative Research

To investigate the intention-behaviour gap in socially responsible consumption of fresh produce, this research also employs a qualitative case study approach, thematically analysed (Ahmed, 2025). Qualitative research prioritises individual viewpoints and the complexities of circumstances, providing a deeper insight into the significance attributed to human or social issues while respecting participants' views (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Dawadi et al., 2021). It aims to comprehend the 'how' and 'why' of human behaviour by thoroughly investigating living experiences (Ahmed, 2025). This approach entails gathering narrative data from individuals' comprehensive insights into the phenomena under investigation, underscoring the various viewpoints of social reality (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021; Hesse-Biber, 2010). It treats the respondents as key informants whose insights the researcher aims to understand (Hesse-Biber, 2010).

3.4.2.1 Participant Selection

A purposive, expert sampling method was utilised to recruit participants for this section of the research. Purposive sampling is a nonprobability sampling technique in which participants are intentionally selected based on their relevance to the research topic (Bullard, 2024; Nikolopoulou, 2022). This approach is particularly suitable for this qualitative research, as it focuses on the comprehensive examination of populations and

challenges, particularly when this specialised knowledge is not accessible through alternative means (Ahmed, 2024; Taherdoost, 2016). According to Etikan (2017), expert sampling enables researchers to gather knowledge from those with established expertise in a particular field, thereby generating rich contextually informed data. This approach facilitates the acquisition of detailed, specific insights; however, it is constrained by the potential for researcher bias and limited generalisability to the broader population.

This portion of the study, therefore, involved conducting semi-structured interviews with participants who possess a profound understanding of the fresh produce sector. Individuals affiliated with relevant academics and ministries, as well as local farmers and representatives from the MFA, were purposely selected for their direct engagement in fresh produce production and expertise in socially responsible practices. Their insights are expected to address the obstacles and motivations underlying these behaviours, as well as the intention-behaviour gap and contextual comprehension of the social aspect of ESG within Malta's fresh produce sector.

Rather than by trying to meet an arbitrary figure, the sample size in qualitative research is dictated by the depth and usefulness of the data, with flexibility shaped by research questions, population variety, and the theoretical framework (Ahmed, 2025; Fusch & Ness, 2015; Suri, 2011). Data saturation serves as the primary benchmark for determining the study's sample size and indicating the conclusion of the data collection stage, thereby bolstering the research's validity and credibility. It signifies the stage at which no additional patterns or themes emerge, and the possibility of bypassing valuable insight is low (Ahmed, 2025; Guy-Evans, 2024). Based on methodological guidelines for qualitative single-case research using thematic analysis, qualitative research may achieve data saturation with relatively small samples, ranging from 4 to 10 or 9 to 17 interviews, depending on the study's focus and complexity (Ahmed, 2025; Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). Moreover, eight interviews were conducted utilising the data saturation principle, meaning that the interviews continued to be conducted until no substantial new information relevant to the study objectives arose.

3.4.2.2 Semi-Structured Interviews

Interviews are frequently employed as a data collection technique in qualitative research approaches (Alsaawi, 2014). Such research requires some interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee, fostering intimacy and emotional release. This dynamic enables the interviewer to explore responses in greater depth, facilitating a more nuanced understanding than those obtained in quantitative interviews, which seek concise numerical responses (Ellis, 2016). Unlike focus groups, individual interviews are advantageous for obtaining personal perspectives, discussing sensitive subjects, facilitating formative program assessments, or investigating novel challenges that require adaptability to provide significant information (Adams, 2015).

Through a concentrated dialogue[2], semi-structured interviews enable the researcher to explore relevant topics that emerge during the discussion, facilitating further questions based on the respondents' replies to open-ended questions (Adams, 2015; Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). These interviews are optimal when a researcher aims to understand an individual's distinct viewpoint rather than to obtain a generalised understanding of a topic (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). By capturing diverse perspectives, semi-structured interview research serves as a tool to validate and uncover novel insights into the topic, gathering a range of participants' attitudes and ultimately providing a comprehensive and precise representation of their views (McIntosh & Morse, 2015). This approach is particularly beneficial for studies that require follow-up questions to elicit more detailed responses to open-ended questions (Adams, 2015). By using pre-planned, adaptable questions, researchers can delve deeper into the participants' perspectives while avoiding the limitations of specific frameworks, thereby enriching the quality and depth of replies (Alsaawi, 2014).

A semi-structured interview guide was created to provide consistency between interviews while also providing freedom to investigate concerns highlighted by participants (Adams, 2015; Alsaawi, 2014; Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). The guide was created utilising the study's research objectives along with significant literature on socially responsible consumerism, ESG, and food system sustainability to ensure

[2] Appendix C.

alignment with the mixed-methods design (Ajzen, 1991; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Yu et al., 2024). The questions were arranged into five theme sections: (A) comprehending social responsibility; (B) observations of consumer behaviour; (C) perceived causes of the intention-behaviour gap; (D) institutional and market-level restrictions; and (E) suggestions and future solutions[3].

3.4.2.3 Data Collection Procedure

During this study, interviews primarily took place in person, with online video calls serving as an alternative option if in-person meetings were not feasible. These interviews were conducted in English throughout and took between 30 and 45 minutes. Interviews may be administered in several modalities, including in person, by telephone, or via video conferencing (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). In-person interviews, in particular, enhance communication by enabling the interviewer to observe both verbal and non-verbal cues (McIntosh & Morse, 2015). This approach is particularly beneficial for monitoring participants' non-verbal responses and using visual indicators to classify material, resulting in more comprehensive data collection (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). To enhance the analysis of the interview, interviewers should also document the research environment and the interviewee's nonverbal cues. Although these signals can be observed in video recordings, they must also be noted in the transcription for a comprehensive analysis (Ellis, 2016).

During this study, in-person interviews were audio-recorded and online interviews were video-recorded. Relying solely on note-taking may be insufficient given the extensive data gathered during the interview, which could lead the researcher to overlook or fail to document specific details (Alsaawi, 2014; Ellis, 2016). Although not obligatory, audio recording is often recommended, especially during semi-structured interviews, allowing the researcher to concentrate more on the participant's responses and capture the interaction verbatim. Typically, these recordings are then carefully transcribed in their entirety, allowing researchers to thoroughly review the transcripts during analysis (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021; Ellis, 2016). Participants' consent is necessary for any

[3] Appendix C.

recording, whether audio or video (Alsaawi, 2014), and it was obtained in writing before the start of the session[4].

3.5 Data Analysis

3.5.1 Quantitative Data Analysis

Quantitative data derived from the questionnaire's closed-ended questions were entered and analysed with IBM SPSS Statistics 28.0.0.0. Demographic variables and response patterns were summarised using descriptive statistics, including frequency tables and crosstabs. The Chi-square test was used to analyse the association between categorical variables and all tests adopted a 0.5 significance level. The questionnaire was also comprised of open-ended questions, whose responses were analysed through NVivo 15.3.0 to uncover recurrent themes and insights that corroborated the statistical results.

3.5.2 Qualitative Data Analysis

Following data collection, the audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed through NVivo 15.3.0. The qualitative data underwent thematic analysis using Braun and Clarke's six-phase methodology, which thoroughly identified, coded, and interpreted patterns within the qualitative data (Ahmed et al., 2025). This process involved data familiarisation, initial code generation, theme development, review, and refinement, enabling the identification of recurring themes across stakeholder narratives (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The analysis prioritised interpretation over quantification, which benefited the study's exploratory approach and enabled triangulation with quantitative survey data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). An initial phase of open coding was used to identify key ideas within the transcripts, followed by axial coding to organise these codes into broader conceptual categories. Through an iterative process of comparison, these categories were refined into overarching themes that directly corresponded with the study's research objectives. To strengthen the validity and reliability of the results and ensure the integrity of the

[4] Appendix E.

research, the analysis employed multiple transcript reviews and was reviewed by supervisors.

3.5.3 Integration of Data

This convergent mixed-methods strategy gathered and evaluated quantitative and qualitative data concurrently within the same timeframe. The two data formats were analysed independently after data collection, then combined (Fetters et al., 2013). Data triangulation involved utilising multiple data sources, such as individuals, situations, or timeframes, to address the research question, as reliance on a single source may raise concerns about the validity of the results (Bhandari, 2022).

This triangulation facilitated a practical understanding of the intention-behaviour gap by integrating the context provided by qualitative data with the trends observed from quantitative data. This integration procedure was essential in achieving the study's objectives. It allowed for the statistical patterns identified in the survey to be linked to the expert insights obtained from stakeholder interviews. Therefore, the research provided a better understanding of the gap between consumer intentions and behaviours when purchasing fresh produce.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

3.6.1 Informed Consent

The voluntary aspect of participation is fundamental to ethical research practices. When collecting primary data, thorough preparation and adherence to ethical standards are crucial to avoid undesirable research complications, as informed consent is fundamental to moral inquiry. Elsner et al. (2001) state that informed consent is the process that ensures participants have a clear understanding of the tasks expected of them, the justification for these tasks, and that their involvement is entirely voluntary. Moreover, participants must provide informed consent, either orally or in writing (Cacciattolo, 2015). Each participant was provided with an information sheet[5] to gain a comprehensive understanding of the implications of participation, the research's

[5] Appendix D.

objectives, methodologies and the data collection and management procedure, thereby enabling individuals to make an informed and voluntary decision regarding their involvement free from any form of coercion (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018; Cacciattolo, 2015; Saunders et al., 2023, p. 284). Obtaining consent establishes a framework that allows participants to evaluate their engagement and adjust their level of participation as needed, and to withdraw from the study at any time (Israel & Hay, 2006; Saunders et al., 2023). Subjects may experience potential reputational harm, emotional distress, or other adverse consequences (Elsner et al., 2001; Wiles et al., 2007) if inadvertently associated with the data they have submitted.

3.6.2 Confidentiality

When managing sensitive data, individuals may opt for anonymity, ensuring that the information they submit cannot be traced back to them. Therefore, in qualitative data, individuals can be pseudonymised to safeguard their privacy (Cacciattolo, 2015; Iphofen, 2020). Moreover, caution is necessary when distributing findings to ensure that no organisations or individuals are identified without explicit consent (Orb et al., 2001). If participants are inadvertently associated with their submitted data, it may result in reputational harm, emotional distress, or other adverse consequences (Saunders et al., 2023). By adhering to these ethical norms, researchers safeguard participants' rights to privacy while preserving the integrity and credibility of the study.

It is necessary to safeguard participants' anonymity and confidentiality when handling research data, both during and after the study commences. During data collection, the researcher must ensure that any information about the participants is protected and accessible only to those with specific authorisation. Physical documentation should be stored in secure, locked locations (Iphofen, 2020). In contrast, digital data, being more vulnerable, requires additional precautions such as encryption, a difficult-to-guess password, or the use of portable external devices like USB drives (Princeton University, 2019), due to its susceptibility to unauthorised internal access. These precautions also include the source data, such as audio or video recordings, and the interpretative outputs, for instance, transcripts and the files generated using software (Iphofen, 2020). This data will be managed in full compliance with Regulation (EU) 2016/679 (European

Commission, 2016), the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the University of Malta's ethical guidelines, ensuring confidentiality, data protection, and safeguarding participants' privacy and rights.

The collected research data is destroyed upon completion of the study and the expiration of the designated data retention period. The destruction of information must be irreversible, ensuring no possibility of recovery, and must use methods that depend on the data format. According to the Information Commissioner's Office (2025) and Saunders et al. (2023), paper-based records are most effectively disposed of by pulverising or shredding, while digital data can be eliminated by removing the physical storage media or by deleting or overwriting files.

3.7 Alternative Approaches & Methodological Justification

3.7.1 Alternative Methodological Approaches

Advanced analytical methods, such as regression analysis, multivariate modelling, and structural equation modelling, provide stronger causal inference. Achieving statistical robustness and model stability with these techniques necessitates confirmatory research designs, validated measurement instruments, and large, probability-based samples (Hair et al., 2019; Kline, 2016; Tabachnick and Fidell, 2019). Furthermore, studying behavioural change over time requires a longitudinal design with repeated assessments, which was beyond the scope of this cross-sectional study (Menard, 2002; Ployhart & Vandenberg, 2010). Due to these methodological constraints and the exploratory focus of the study, predictive statistical modelling was deemed unsuitable.

3.7.2 Methodology Justification

As stated previously, this study used an exploratory convergent mixed-methods approach to examine the intention-behaviour gap in socially responsible fresh-produce consumption in a small-state setting. Exploratory designs are useful when phenomena are context-specific and understudied. The goal is to find patterns and correlations rather than test established causal links (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Dawadi et al., 2021). Given the lack of previous empirical research on the social dimension of fresh-

produce consumption in Malta, the study used descriptive and association analyses to examine relationships among attitudes, intentions, and self-reported behaviours, employing frequency tables, cross-tabulations, and summary statistics (Bhandari, 2020).

Methodological triangulation enhanced theoretical robustness by integrating quantitative survey data with qualitative insights from semi-structured interviews (Fetters et al., 2013; Guest & Fleming, 2015). Unlike single-method studies, triangulation is widely recognised for improving credibility and contextual validity in research on complex social behaviour, especially when statistical generalisation is not the primary objective (Hesse-Biber, 2010; Gibson, 2017). This approach was well-suited to the study, prioritising interpretative depth and contextual understanding over causal prediction.

3.8 Summary

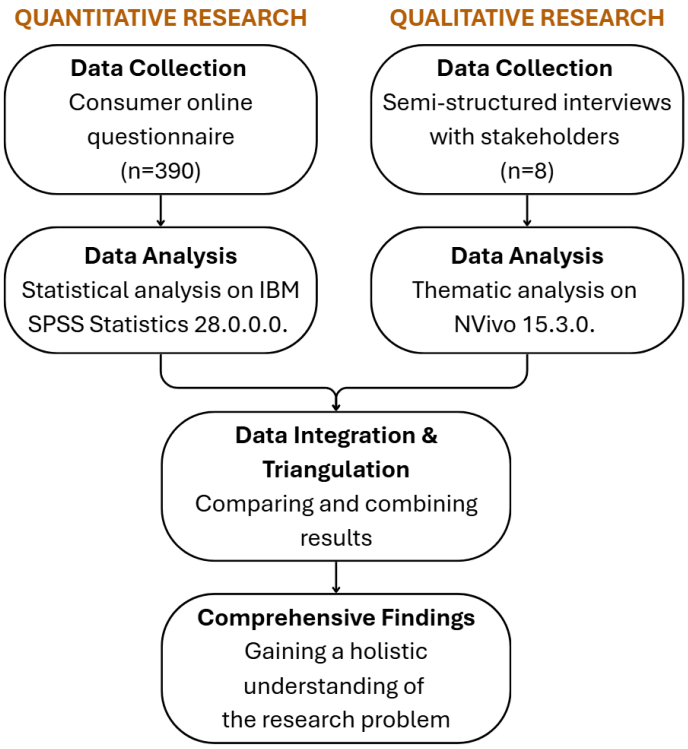


Figure 3.2: Key stages of methodology approach

This chapter discussed how a convergent mixed-methodology was used to investigate the social-responsibility intention-behaviour gap in purchasing fresh produce in Malta. Guided by the TPB and the S-O-R Model, quantitative data were collected via self-administered online questionnaires from adults residing on the Maltese islands and

closed-ended questions were systematically analysed using statistical tests. Semi-structured interviews with farmers, academics, and professionals connected to the MFA yielded qualitative insights. Semi-structured interviews and open-ended questionnaire responses were assessed thematically using NVivo 15.3.0, whereas quantitative questionnaire data were analysed using descriptive and non-parametric statistical methods in SPSS.

By combining the questionnaire's general trends with detailed perspectives from interviews with key stakeholders, triangulation enabled a comprehensive understanding of the factors driving intentions and behaviours. The next chapter presents the results of these analyses and discusses the findings in relation to relevant literature.

4 Results, Analysis & Discussion

4.1 Chapter Overview

This chapter presents the results obtained from analysing quantitative survey and qualitative interview data and discusses the themes and patterns that emerged. The survey's statistical findings sought to capture consumers' social responsibility intentions, attitudes, and behaviours regarding the consumption of fresh produce. At the same time, the interviews offered contextual insight and depth into these patterns.

Quantitative and qualitative data were collected concurrently over approximately two months. The online questionnaire yielded 390 valid responses, with one submission excluded for lack of consent. Survey distribution primarily occurred via Facebook, LinkedIn, Instagram, the University of Malta registrar, and also by word of mouth. Access to the registry of the Office of the Prime Minister was requested but ultimately denied. Furthermore, eight semi-structured interviews were conducted, both online and in person, with experts in the field to provide further depth and contextual understanding of the topic. Collectively, these complementary data sources facilitate a thorough investigation of the correlation between consumer intentions and actual behaviours in the context of socially responsible fresh produce purchasing.

The analytical process was guided by the conceptual framework illustrated in Figure 4.1, which positions socially responsible consumption as the interaction between contextual, behavioural, and systemic determinants. Table 4.1 presents the qualitative thematic coding structure, detailing the allocation of 914 coded references across six parent themes identified from stakeholder interviews. These frameworks are based on quantitative trends and qualitative coding frequencies, thereby ensuring balanced representation across methodologies. It demonstrates how Malta's unique context shapes consumer understanding, which, in turn, flows into organisational and individual pathways that either facilitate or inhibit socially responsible actions.

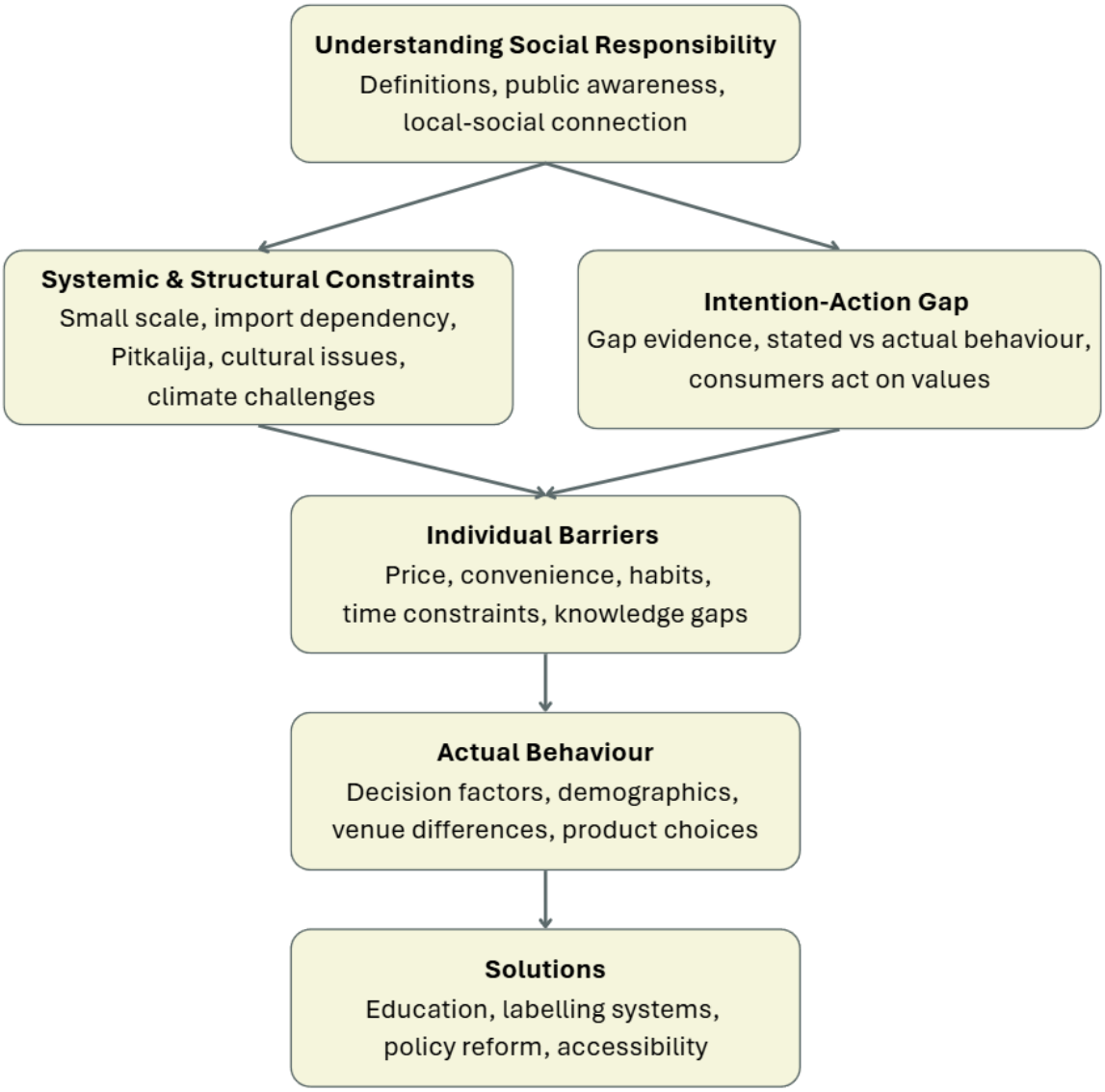


Figure 4.1: Conceptual framework illustrating the intention-action gap in socially responsible fresh produce consumption in Malta.

Building on this framework, this chapter is structured around six integrated themes that address the contextual, behavioural, and systemic dimensions of social responsible consumption (Figure 4.1): commencing with the understanding of social responsibility (Section 4.3), the intention-action gap (Section 4.4), systemic and structural barrier and (Section 4.5), necessitating multi-level solutions (Section 4.6), and the comprehensive synthesis of key findings (Sections 4.7). Collectively, these sections present a cohesive narrative that links consumer intention and action to institutional contexts and potential change.

Table 4.1: Qualitative thematic distribution.

Theme	References	Percentage (%)
Malta Context	159	17.4
Understanding Social Responsibility	42	4.5
Consumer Behaviour	166	18.2
Intention-Action Gap	232	25.4
Institutions & Systems	156	17.1
Solutions	159	17.4
Total	**914**	**100**

4.2 Sample Demographics

4.2.1 Quantitative Demographics

Understanding the demographic profile of respondents is essential for contextualising the subsequent findings, because consumer choices are often influenced by age, gender, and education (Vermeir & Verbeke, 2006). Table 4.2 indicates that female respondents were overrepresented in the sample (61.8%), and male participation was comparatively lower. This discrepancy contrasts with national demographics, in which males constitute a slight majority of 53.1% (Migliore, 2025). Previous research has found that women exhibit greater responsiveness to the societal implications of sustainability consciousness (Islam et al., 2024), a fact that may impact the overall results. A small proportion of participants who identified as non-binary or preferred not to disclose their gender were collectively categorised as 'Other' and handled with caution for statistical analysis.

The survey sample consisted only of individuals aged 18 and older, excluding younger age groups. The sample was skewed toward younger adults, with respondents aged 18-34 comprising 52.3% of the sample, despite making up only 31.1% of the Maltese population in that age group (Migliore, 2025). Middle-aged adults (35-54) were proportionally represented, while older adults (55+) were underrepresented, particularly those 65 and over, and comprised just 6.2% of the sample, compared to 41% of the national population. This imbalance likely stems from the survey's online dissemination, which may have been more easily accessed and appealing to younger participants than older ones. This demographic skew may have influenced the findings, as younger adults

are frequently reported in the literature to have greater sustainability awareness and intentions (Djafarova & Foots, 2022; Mas-Manchón et al., 2024; Sweet, 2025).

Table 4.2: Quantitative survey demographics (n=390).

Demographic Variable	Category	Count	Percentage (%)
Gender	Man	146	37.4
	Woman	241	61.8
	Other	3	0.8
Age	18-24	101	25.9
	25-34	103	26.4
	35-44	53	13.6
	45-54	53	13.6
	55-65+	80	20.5
Nationality	Maltese	363	93.1
	Other	27	6.9
Region	Northern	88	22.6
	Northern Harbour	127	32.6
	South Eastern	51	13.1
	Southern Harbour	26	6.7
	Western	86	22.1
	Gozo	12	3.1
Highest level of Education	Vocational Education	81	20.8
	Undergraduate	120	30.8
	Postgraduate	189	48.5
Employment Status	Employed	320	82.1
	Student	29	7.4
	Not Working	41	10.5

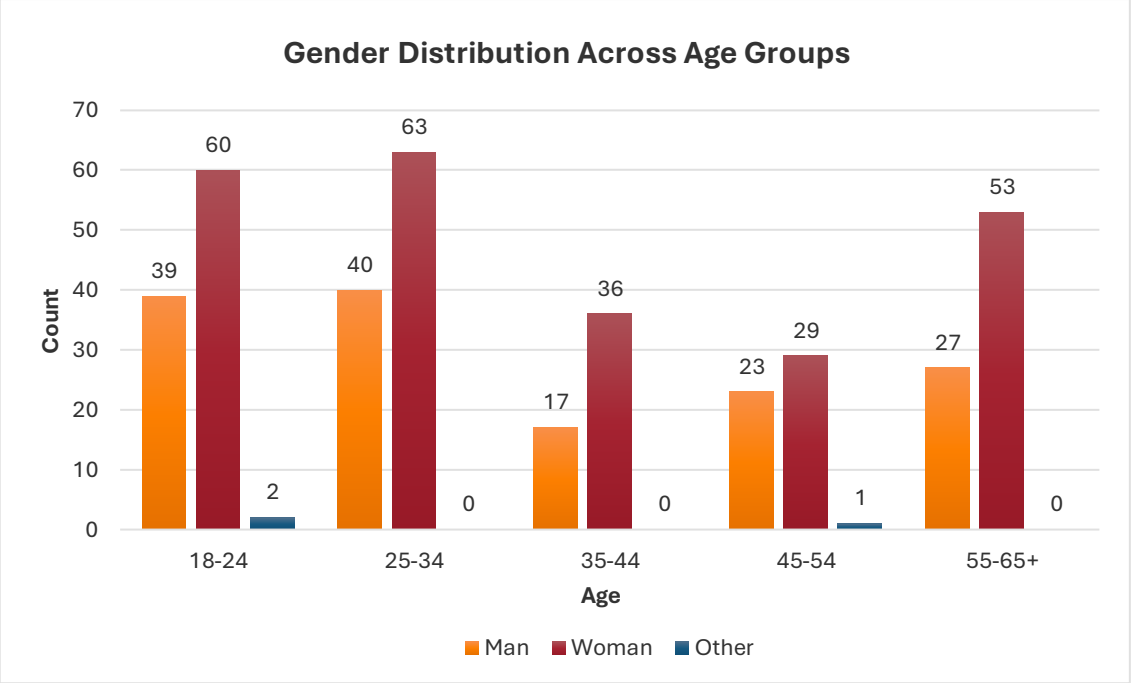


Figure 4.2: Clustered bar graph showing the gender distribution across age groups.

Figure 4.2 depicts the distribution of respondents by age and gender, showing that women outnumbered men across all age groups. The sample was overwhelmingly comprised of Maltese (93.1%) and employed individuals (82.1%), representing Malta's overall demographic structure. Participants selected their locality from a dropdown menu in the questionnaire. However, due to the limited responses of some areas, these categories were not suitable for statistical analysis. As a result, localities were amalgamated into Malta's six official districts according to the categorisation of the National Statistics Office: Northern Harbour, Southern Harbour, South Eastern, Western, Northern, and Gozo & Comino (NSO, 2024). The regional breakdown indicates that the predominant percentage of respondents live in the Northern Harbour area (33.6%), with the Southern Harbour having lower representation (6.9%), closely representing Malta's population concentration, notably in the Northern Harbour, which includes some of the most densely inhabited urban areas (Migliore, 2025). The educational attainment of respondents was significantly elevated, with most possessing tertiary-level education - 48.5% reported having postgraduate degrees. This finding aligns with current evidence that higher educational attainment fosters more ethical consumption, suggesting that respondents' advanced education levels may partly explain the heightened ethical intentions observed in this research (De Pelsmacker et al.,

2005). Respondents who reported having primary, secondary or post-secondary education were collectively classified as 'Vocational Education' for this study due to the low selection rate.

4.2.2 Qualitative Demographics

Table 4.3: Qualitative interview participants (n=8).

Participant	Role	Affiliation / Sector
Andre Vella	Marketing Standards Officer	Malta Food Agency
David Xuereb	Chair & ESG Expert	Malta ESG Alliance
Jonathan Brincat	Chef & Restaurateur	Independent Restaurant Sector
Participant 1*	Senior Agri-Food Development Official	Government Agency
Lidl Representative	Corporate Representative	Lidl Malta
Malcolm Borg	Chairman	Agriculture Consultative Council of the Ministry for Agriculture
Marika Micallef	Farmer	Independent Farm
Mark Ciantar	Owner / Manager	Smart Supermarket

Table 4.3 outlines the profile of the interview participants (n=8), who were selected to represent a range of roles that shape Malta's fresh produce sector. The sample comprised individuals from production (n=1), retail (n=2), policy (n=2), food service (n=1), and sustainability governance (n=2), thereby ensuring representation across critical stages of the supply chain. The Senior Agri-Food Development Official (Participant 1) requested confidentiality regarding their identity and organisational affiliation; this has been anonymised accordingly. The participants collectively offer complementary insights into market realities, policy implementation, and institutional constraints, providing essential context for interpreting the consumer-level findings presented in the subsequent sections.

4.2.3 Shopping Behaviour Baseline

According to Table 4.4, almost half of the respondents (49.5%) purchased fresh produce daily or multiple times a week, followed by 40.5% who did so weekly, whereas 10%

bought items monthly or less frequently. The association between age groups and shopping frequency was deemed statistically significant (p-value=0.006). The younger cohort demonstrated diverse behaviours, with 18.8% making purchases monthly or less and 43.6% shopping daily or weekly. Contrastingly, respondents aged 55 and older exhibited the highest engagement levels, with 60% making daily or weekly purchases and the lowest incidence of infrequent purchases, with only 2.5% making monthly or fewer purchases. These observed age-related disparities suggest a generational shift in purchasing behaviour, showing a consistent decline in the regular buying of fresh produce among younger age groups. Younger consumers tend to exhibit more irregular patterns, possibly due to time constraints and convenience-focused lifestyles. At the same time, older demographics display steadfast, habitual links to fresh produce, in line with traditional food customs. Although some research indicates that younger generations exhibit lower demand for fresh vegetables (Stewart & Lucier, 2009), other studies show that age-related consumption patterns vary by region and context (Stadlmayr et al., 2023).

Table 4.4: Crosstab showing fresh produce shopping frequency by age group.

Fresh Produce Shopping Frequency in Malta

		Daily/A few times a week	Once a week	Never/Once a month	Total
Ages	18-24	44	38	19	**101**
		43.6%	37.6%	18.8%	**100%**
	25-34	47	43	13	**103**
		45.6%	41.7%	12.6%	**100%**
	35-44	30	22	1	**53**
		56.6%	41.5%	1.9%	**100%**
	45-54	24	25	4	**53**
		45.3%	47.2%	7.5%	**100%**
	55-65+	48	30	2	**80**
		60.0%	37.5%	2.5%	**100%**
Total		**193**	**158**	**39**	**390**
		49.5%	**40.5%**	**10.0%**	**100%**

$X^2(8)=21.421$, p=0.006

Shopping venue usage patterns highlight a strong preference for conventional retail outlets over more socially responsible alternatives. Among all venues provided, supermarkets had the highest usage frequency, with 52.3% of participants reporting frequent use, whereas only 31.5% reported rarely using them. Conversely, venues that provided more direct connections to producers and greater transparency exhibited differing trends: only 21.5% of respondents reported often purchasing directly from farmers, whilst 67.4% did so rarely. Health food shops had the lowest overall engagement, with only 6.9% of respondents using them. Local markets (39.2%) and mobile grocery vans (18.5%) represented intermediate patterns, reflecting a limited yet consistent utilisation of alternative retail channels. Although supermarkets remained the most frequently used venue across all demographic groups, differences in venue use were significant for local markets ($\chi^2(8)=34.298$, $p<0.001$) and health food stores ($\chi^2(8)=18.918$, $p=0.015$). The prevalence of supermarkets creates a behavioural baseline, reinforcing habit formation through the frequency of previous actions (Gardner et al., 2020)[6], illustrating how consumers default to familiar locations even when this runs counter to their stated ethical intentions (Triandis, 1980). While local vendors and vans are visible, the marginalisation of potentially more transparent and locally connected venues extends beyond consumer choice. It highlights systemic issues related to infrastructure, convenience, and accessibility that limit consumers' ability to meet socially responsible goals. Feldmann & Hamm (2015) emphasise that the locations from which consumers acquire their products influence their interpretation and response to social responsibility assertions.

[6] See Figure A.1 in Appendix A.

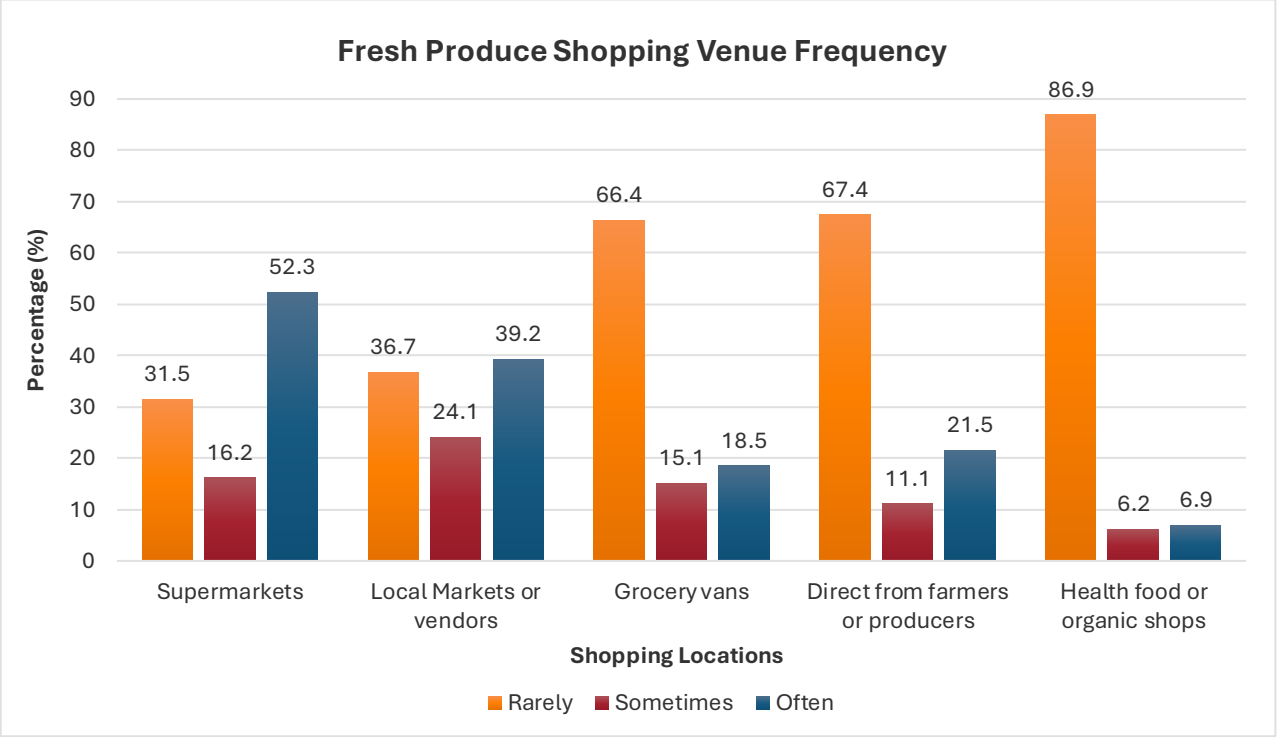


Figure 4.3: Clustered bar graph illustrating fresh produce shopping venue frequency.

4.3 Understanding Social Responsibility

4.3.1 Consumer Awareness & Recognition

The questionnaire results showed a moderate level of awareness of socially responsible terminology in the context of fresh produce consumption. Specifically, 54.6% of respondents, or 213 out of 390, indicated that they were familiar with the term 'socially responsible food' before participating in the survey. Postgraduate respondents demonstrated a noticeably higher level of familiarity with the term, at 54.5%, compared to 43.2% of those with vocational education. The analysis revealed a significant correlation between awareness and educational level ($\chi^2(2)=8.157$, $p=0.017$). The research also indicates possible generational disparities in perceptions of social responsibility, with no significant link between age and awareness ($\chi^2(8)=13.054$, $p=0.110$). This finding aligns with earlier research showing that age is not a reliable predictor of awareness or understanding of ethical food attributes, as numerous studies have reported non-significant or inconsistent effects related to age (Bray et al., 2011; De Pelsmacker et al., 2005).

Crucially, understanding the term was a strong indicator of the behaviours to be considered, as shown in Table 4.5. A total of 47.9% of individuals familiar with the concept of 'socially responsible food' reported that they often consider social responsibility when purchasing produce, notably higher than the 24.9% of individuals unfamiliar with the term ($\chi^2(2)=29.075$, $p<0.001$). This discrepancy suggests that, despite its limited general use, knowledge of the vocabulary, including terms such as 'sustainable sourcing', 'ethical', 'fair-trade', or 'socially responsible production' helps differentiate between customers who actively participate in social responsibility purchasing and those who do not (Carrigan & Attalla, 2001).

Table 4.5: Frequency table showing awareness of the term 'socially responsible food' by consideration.

		Often	Rarely	Sometime	Total
Awareness of the term 'socially responsible food'	No	44	47	86	**177**
		24.9%	26.6%	48.6%	**100%**
	Yes	102	22	89	**213**
		47.9%	10.3%	41.8%	**100%**
Total		**146**	**69**	**175**	**390**
		37.4%	**17.7%**	**44.9%**	**100%**

X2(2)=29.075, p=<0.001

Analysis of consumer signals shows that 'locally grown in Malta' labels are the most prominent indicator, preferred by 34.5% of participants (Figure 4.4). 'Organic or pesticide-free' produce is followed by 24.9%, while foreign certifications are much less common. Direct questions to the vendor were used by 11.5% of respondents. Information on safety and wages, indications of cooperative or small-farm origins, and transparent supply chain details received limited interest, suggesting that these more overtly 'social' dimensions of responsibility are largely overlooked in Malta's fresh produce retail industry, despite their significance under the 'Social' criterion of ESG. Notably, 5.9% chose 'none of the above,' indicating that they do not seek any signals. Those who selected the open-ended 'Other' responses further confirmed these trends. Participants primarily identified ethical or organic certifications and local origin as indicators of social responsibility. They also expressed personal trust in the vendors, the freshness of the products, and the use of low-plastic packaging. These findings indicate

that customers see social responsibility through tangible, observable product features rather than abstract ethical or social principles (Loureiro & Lotade, 2005)[7].

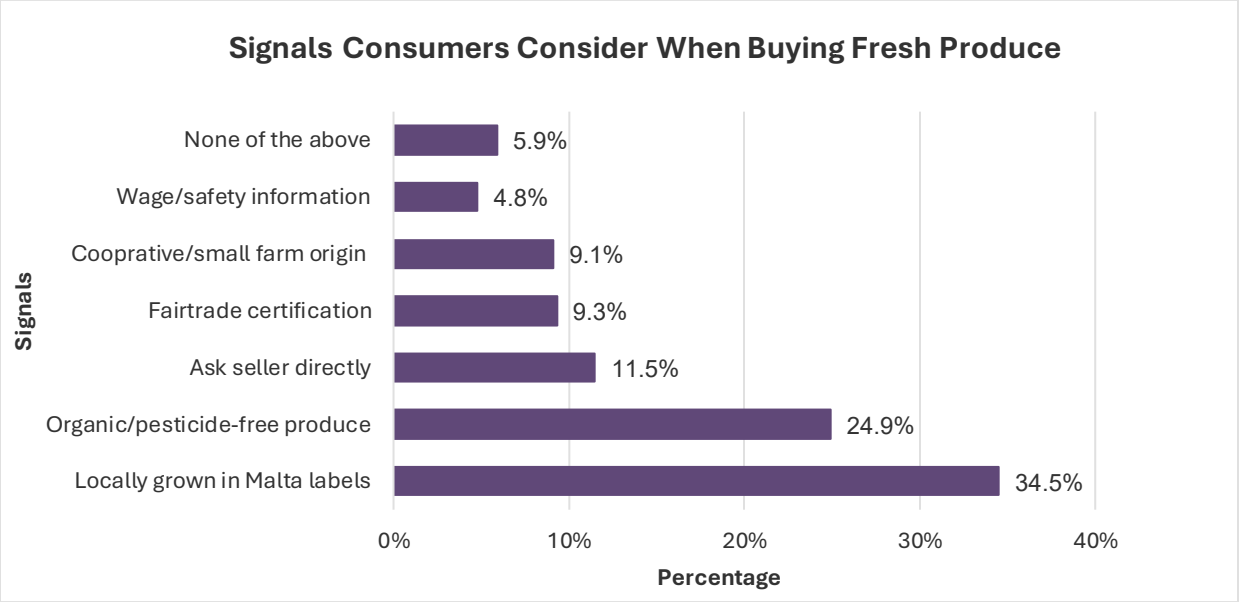


Figure 4.4: Bar graph illustrating the signals consumers consider when buying fresh produce. Respondents could select up to three signals. The percentage reflects the total number of selections, not the number of respondents.

4.3.2 Stakeholder Interpretations & Public Understanding

The qualitative research revealed significant variation among stakeholders' definitions and interpretations of social responsibility related to food consumption. Three themes emerged from the analysis: different definitions, limited public knowledge, and the links between local and societal obligations (Figure 4.5).

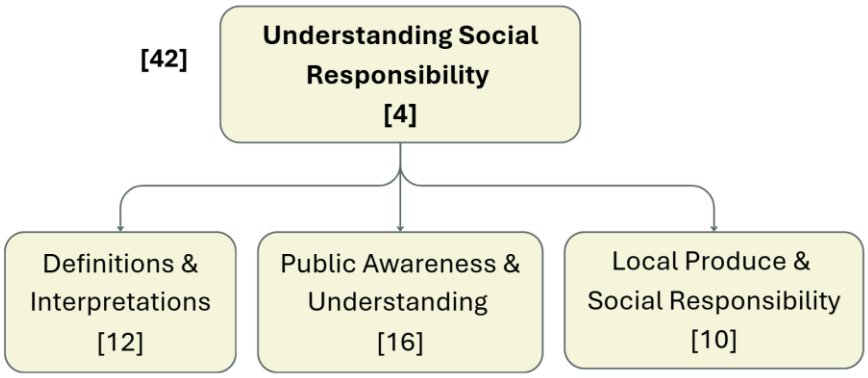


Figure 4.5: Understanding the term 'social responsibility' thematic map.

[7] See Table A.1 in Appendix A.

Stakeholders provided a range of definitions and diverse interpretations, often linking social responsibility to moral or ethical behaviour rather than a specific framework. Brincat associated it with respect and decency: *"Being a decent human being",* contributing to the environment, people, and animals, and *"doing the right thing"*. Xuereb described the concept from an ESG perspective, presenting it as both a structural and ethical issue: *"respect for everybody, regardless of means",* and the obligation to ensure *"every person is treated as a human being, irrespective of resources"*. He linked social responsibility to global food justice, pointing out inequalities in access: *"The whole planet should be able to feed the whole planet, but actually does not*", as well as the exploitation of food industry workers who are often *"underpaid or not taken care of"*. Borg echoed this point, focusing on the workforce by emphasising the importance of *"homing in on the people aspect … their conditions, wages, fair price, feeling socially valued"*. Micallef shared a farmer's perspective, highlighting production methods: *"social responsibility means making sure we bring the product in good condition, without fertilisers, and as fresh as possible*", along with the obligation to provide a fresh product to promote proper eating habits. Lidl provided a corporate perspective: *"Taking into account the well-being of individuals and the environment throughout the value chain."* The differing definitions underscore a lack of clarity, even among knowledgeable individuals. The absence of a shared definition of what *constitutes socially responsible fresh produce* in practice creates challenges for retailer communication and consumer recognition.

Stakeholders critically reflected on public attitudes, recognising that although *"people are becoming more aware of those behind the product",* most agreed that overall public awareness remains limited (16 references). Borg reiterated that: *"Perhaps it is not a conscious thing they have in mind when purchasing",* whereas others stated that they *"do not believe the general public is educated enough"*. This qualitative consensus aligns with quantitative findings, as 45.4% were unfamiliar with the term, and explicit social signals received limited recognition. These observations reveal an apparent disparity between institutional understanding and public perception, suggesting that awareness of social responsibility is influenced more by habit than by a profound, informed ethical consideration.

A recurring theme across interviews was the general public's tendency to equate social responsibility with the consumption of locally produced goods. Participants noted that consumers often see buying Maltese products as a socially responsible act in itself, regardless of broader ethical considerations. Truong et al. (2021) suggests that this link corresponds with a limitation of knowledge, whereby the availability of fresh goods supplants social and labour awareness. Borg observed that individuals frequently establish an indirect connection between local produce and social responsibility, noting that *"indirectly by inference … If there are campaigns to promote local, then indirectly you are promoting more socially just food"*. This association reflects trust in local farmers and a sense of national identity, but also reveals a narrowing of understanding, where the proximity of fresh produce substitutes for labour and social awareness. This indirect link explains why 67.8% of respondents viewed locally grown in Malta labels as indicators of social responsibility. 'Local' thus serves as a substitute for ideals like freshness, quality, and economic support, while often excluding issues like decent salaries and community welfare.

4.3.3 Integrated Discussion

The convergent analysis indicates that, although Maltese consumers and stakeholders generally recognise social responsibility, their understanding is limited not by a lack of information but by an absence of clear concepts. Both data sources suggest a limited awareness, with people able to recognise the term and support its ethical importance, yet rarely implementing it in food-system practices. Definitions varied among educated stakeholders, suggesting conceptual ambiguity rather than a mere knowledge gap. When experts disagree on meanings, it leads to widespread confusion among consumers.

For various reasons, consumers seek 'local' without fully understanding its implications. Stakeholders noted that customers do not explicitly recognise social elements, which coexist with the high demand for local origin labels, but they establish this connection indirectly. This situation reveals a contradiction between strong normative views on fair treatment and responsibilities towards farmers, and a lack of conceptual clarity regarding the true nature of social responsibility. Cultural values with historical roots support local agriculture, existing independently of the concept of social responsibility.

4.4 The Intention-Action Gap

4.4.1 Stated Values & Intentions

Using importance ratings, questionnaire participants indicated strong normative beliefs about social responsibility, with four considerations garnering significant support, setting them apart from traditional purchase drivers such as freshness and price (Table 4.6). A substantial number of respondents expressed the belief that producers deserve fair treatment (42.6%), that there is a moral obligation to support local farmers (48.2%), and that the business's use of sustainable or ethical practices is crucial (50.8%). Importantly, each of these four dimensions showed statistically significant associations with the reported frequency of consideration ($p<0.001$ for all). Respondents who reported considering social responsibility often when making purchases were notably more likely to rate these factors as highly important, indicating that these stated values are linked to actual behaviour rather than mere rhetoric.

Table 4.6: Importance of socially responsible factors when choosing where to buy fresh produce

Importance of social responsibility factors when choosing where to buy fresh produce

	High Importance	Neutral	Low Importance	Total
Locally grown or sourced	212	108	70	390
	54.4%	27.7%	17.9%	100%
Treats staff fairly	166	111	113	390
	42.6%	28.5%	29.0%	100%
Supports local farmers	188	125	77	390
	48.2%	32.1%	19.7%	100%
Ethical/sustainable practices	198	120	72	390
	50.8%	30.8%	18.5%	100%

Consumers strongly associate concepts of community and fairness, yet they often fail to consistently implement these principles. This disconnection between values and actions makes these principles seem more aspirational than attainable. Stakeholders have questioned the sincerity of these values, with one participant noting that *"social responsibility stops where the wallet starts"*. Similarly, a retailer observed, *"people say*

they care, but when it comes to price, it is another story". These observations underscore a moral-financial tension that hinders ethical consumption among willing consumers. A critical qualification emerged when agreement statements involved sacrifice or personal cost, as seen in Figure 4.6. Whilst 89.5% valued the equitable treatment of producers and 81% expressed a responsibility to support local farmers, only 57.7% agreed that they are willing to spend more for safe conditions and fair pay. The 23-31% point disparity reflects the intention-action gap, underscoring the aspirational nature of consumer values and corroborating external research, indicating that ethical commitments often falter when confronted with the primary obstacle of cost (Bonanno, 2025; Drimie et al., 2025).

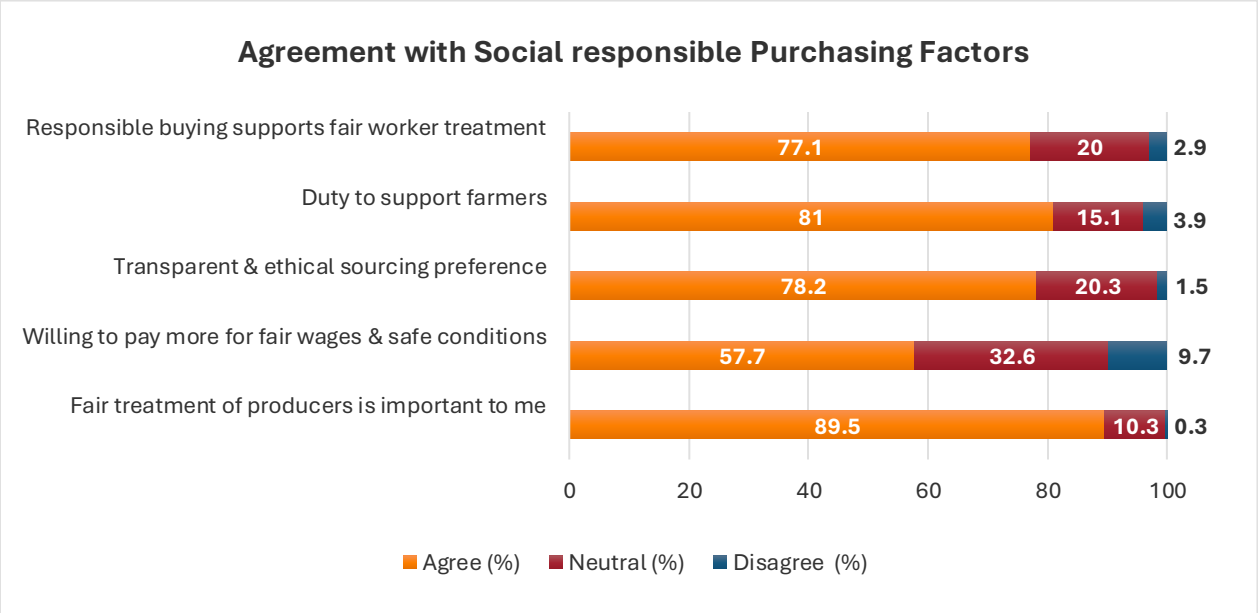


Figure 4.6: Stacked bar graph illustrating the agreement levels of socially responsible purchasing factors.

The agreement statements presented in Figure 4.6 were consistent with importance ratings. They strongly predicted consideration behaviour, with those who found fair treatment essential and believed that it is vital for businesses to treat their producers fairly having a higher likelihood of considering the option ($\chi^2(4)=26.998$, $p<0.001$). Individuals who prioritised a just treatment of employees demonstrated a heightened readiness to pay increased prices for produce that guarantees fair wages and safe working environments ($\chi^2(4)=26.234$, $p<0.001$). This mirrors the pattern observed among those who affirmed a sense of duty to support farmers, who were significantly more likely to report considering social responsibility when purchasing fresh produce ($\chi^2(4)=51.110$,

p<0.001). This consistency reflects a genuine expression of value rather than a superficial one. As Xuereb noted, *"people do have a conscience, but the system does not make it easy for them to act on it"*, raising the issue of whether intentions can be converted into conduct.

4.4.2 Actual Behaviour

While intentions toward socially responsible consumption were generally strong, self-reported behaviour revealed a more complex reality. Despite widespread agreement with statements emphasising ethical sourcing, local support and fairness, these values were not consistently reflected in actual purchasing choices.

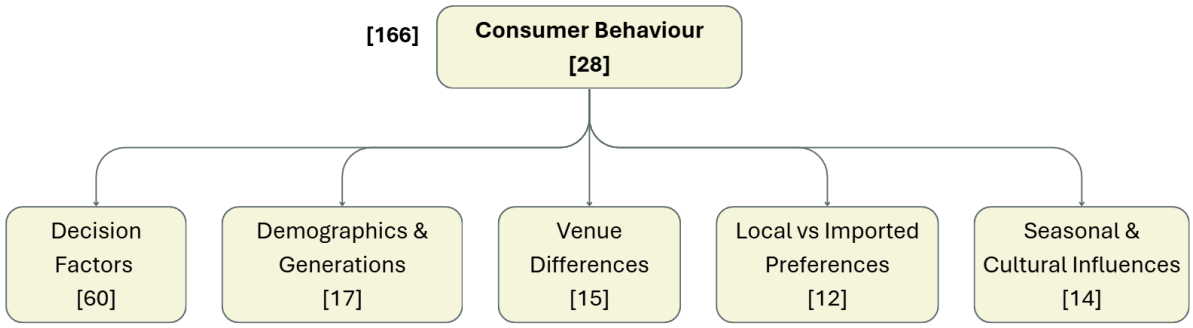


Figure 4.7: Thematic map illustrating the factors of consumer behaviour.

When asked directly how often respondents' actual purchases reflect their values around fairness, sustainability, or local support, 58.5% acknowledged a gap between their purchasing behaviour and stated values and the remaining 41.5% reported that they 'often' do. In comparison, 48.2% admitted 'sometimes' and 10.3% 'rarely or never'. This substantial difference becomes particularly evident when comparing these behavioural admissions to the strong value endorsements. Whilst 89.5% valued fair treatment of producers and 81% agreed that they have a duty to support local farmers, the majority admitted that their purchasing decisions did not consistently reflect this. The substantial agreement on ethical obligations (81%-89.5%) contrasts sharply with the high admission rate (58.5%) that these principles are not regularly represented in purchasing activity.

Although most individuals agree that it is essential to support ethical companies and local farms, consumers' actual purchasing habits consistently deviate from these stated commitments. With 39% of consumers citing supermarkets as their primary shopping

destination and 52.3% making frequent purchases, supermarkets seem to dominate the retail industry. Contrastingly, 6.9% of people routinely shop at health food stores, and only 21.5% of people purchase directly from farmers. Given that 54.4% of respondents ranked 'locally grown or sourced' as a priority, this pattern runs counter to the priorities that respondents said. However, their most popular shopping destination is the least likely to offer transparent and locally sourced alternatives. The disparity is not just an isolated instance of inconsistency but rather, it is a structural behavioural gap in which day-to-day operations routinely fall short of the moral standards that customers support. Furthermore, a significant discrepancy exists between declared intentions and actual execution, mainly due to inadequate compliance tools.

This gap remains evident even among highly engaged consumers, indicating that those who vocally endorse socially responsible businesses still exhibit a significant disconnection between their intentions and actions (Table 4.7). Of the 188 respondents who rated 'support for local farmers' as highly important, 45.7% indicated that their purchases reflect these values only sometimes or rarely ($\chi^2(4)=37.205$, $p<0.001$). This result aligns with studies suggesting that intentions often do not translate into actions unless explicitly supported by routines (Carrington et al., 2014). Similarly, individuals who strongly agreed that they actively support socially responsible businesses indicated that their purchases frequently align with their values, with 58.5% of the most committed segment recognising this. Additionally, 41.4% of this segment reported behavioural inconsistency ($\chi^2(4)=97.823$, $p<0.001$). This pattern was consistent across all dimensions of SR: ethical practices, indicating a 47.4% gap; locally sourced products, illustrating a 47.5% gap among high-importance raters; and equitable treatment of staff. Similar disparities are evident in quantitative data from other research, such as a 37% difference in sustainable food purchases (Vermeir & Verbeke, 2006). The gap is not limited to disengaged consumers who superficially express values; it also encompasses individuals who exhibit genuine commitment through various measures.

Table 4.7: Crosstab showing the stated commitment to supporting socially responsible businesses by reflecting values in purchases.

		How often do your actual purchases reflect your values around fairness, sustainability, or local support?			
		Often	Sometimes	Rarely / Never	Total
Actively try to support socially responsible businesses	Agree	137	89	8	234
		58.5%	38.0%	3.4%	100%
	Neutral	24	86	21	131
		18.3%	65.6%	16.0%	100%
	Disagree	1	13	11	25
		4.0%	52.0%	44.0%	100%
Total		162	188	40	390
		41.5%	48.2%	10.3%	100%

Stakeholders consistently noted an apparent discrepancy between consumer rhetoric and actual behaviour, which supported the quantitative trend with qualitative data. Several experts, including Borg and Brincat, have provided insightful characterisations of this phenomenon, observing that "*people bluff a bit too much… they say what they think they should say, but it is not necessarily what they intend to do*". Brincat characterised the phenomenon more bluntly as "*hypocrisy*". This comes about because stated principles prove fragile when confronted with competing priorities. For example, although consumers may voice support for ethical preferences, "*but then… they are generally not willing to make that change*" when the ethical option is more expensive.

Moreover, more than half of the respondents (55.6%) refrained from visiting a store due to ethical considerations, a behaviour that was significantly correlated with higher concern levels. Of these respondents, 27.9% avoided the stores because of dishonest or misleading business practices (Table 4.8). Among those who avoided stores, 26.7% expressed a strong concern for social responsibility, a figure that was twice as high as the 13.9% of non-avoiders ($\chi^2(3)=33.700$, $p<0.001$). The fact that avoidance does not incur extra time or cost suggests that when obstacles are modest, ethical intentions are reflected in one's conduct. Many respondents admitted to prioritising price,

convenience, and product availability over ethical or social considerations when selecting fresh produce. This inconsistency indicates that structural and situational limitations often overshadow moral awareness and pro-social views. These limitations, including restricted access to local alternatives, financial constraints and time constraints, significantly influence consumer decision-making.

Table 4.8: Frequency table illustrating Reasons for avoiding a shop/seller due to ethical concerns. Respondents could select up to three methods. Counts reflect the total number of selections (n=217), not the number of respondents.

Reasons for avoiding a shop or seller due to ethical concerns	Count (N)	Percentage (%)
Unfair treatment of workers	83	22.5%
Disagreement with farming or environmental practices	50	13.6%
Dishonest or misleading business practices	103	27.9%
Business did not align with my personal values	85	23.0%
Lack of support for the local community	48	13.0%
Total	369	100%

Table 4.9: Frequency table illustrating reasons for not avoiding a shop or seller despite ethical concerns. Respondents could select up to three methods. Counts reflect total selections (n=173), not the number of respondents.

Reasons for not avoiding a shop or seller despite ethical concerns	Count (N)	Percentage (%)
No situation has required it	152	58.0%
I do not usually consider these issues when shopping	35	13.4%
Difficult to identify which sellers are SR	56	21.4%
Price or convenience takes priority	15	5.7%
Avoiding a business would not make a difference	4	1.5%
Total	262	100%

The results demonstrate that sociodemographic variables, including age and education, primarily influence consumers' knowledge of socially conscious concerns and their vulnerability to financial obstacles, but are insufficient to bridge the ethical purchasing intention-action gap (De Pelsmacker et al., 2005; McCluskey et al., 2009; Vermeir & Verbeke, 2006). Although customers genuinely care about fair labour standards and producers' well-being, these concerns often fall by the wayside when making actual purchasing choices. This tendency aligns with other findings, suggesting that ethical

knowledge rarely translates into consistent behaviour without clear market signals or supportive infrastructure (Carrington et al., 2010; Van Bussel et al., 2022).

4.4.3 Why the Gap Exists

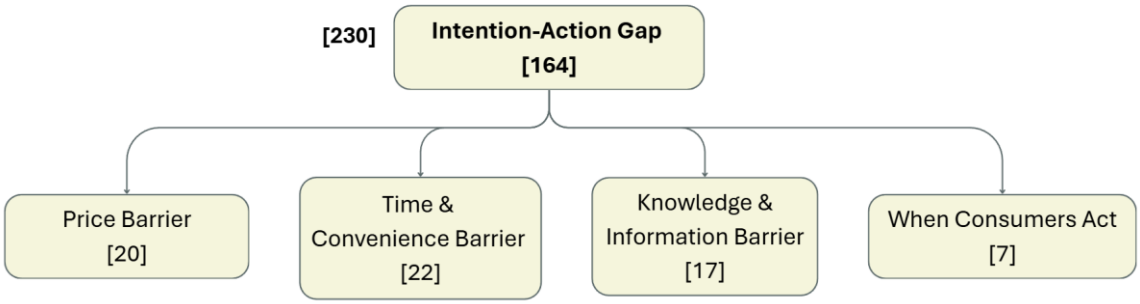


Figure 4.8: Thematic map consisting of factors that make up the intention-action gap.

The intention-action gap highlights the primary barriers: price, convenience and knowledge, each constraining consumers' capacity to act in accordance with their ethical intentions, despite evident awareness and motivation to do so in everyday purchasing. These obstacles serve not only as markers of customer indifference but also as consequences of fundamental structural and informational constraints, highlighting the mechanisms by which stated values do not translate into behaviour (59 references).

Figure 4.9: Word cloud derived from stakeholder discussions of barriers to socially responsible purchasing.

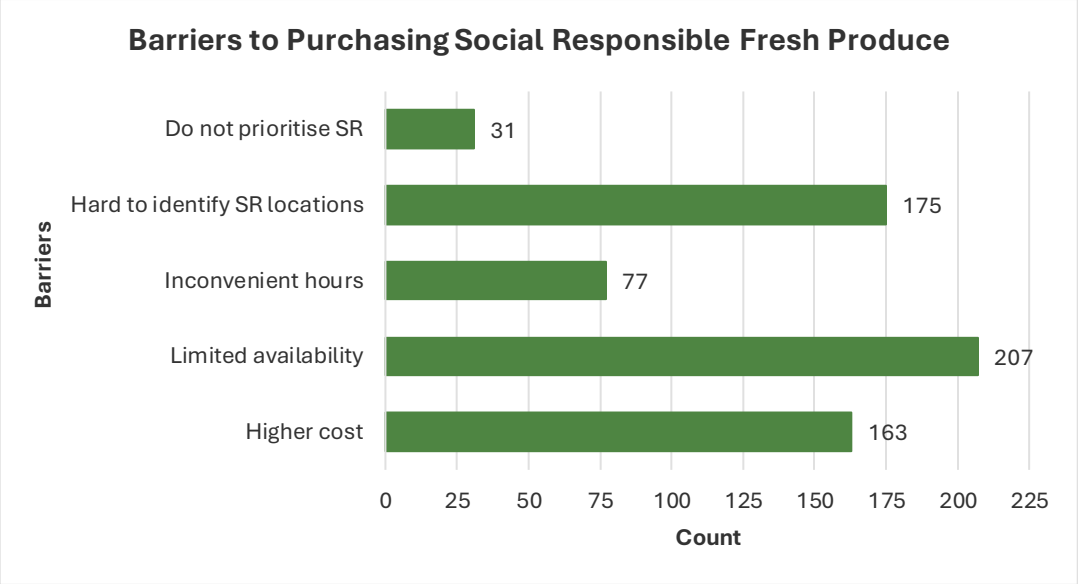
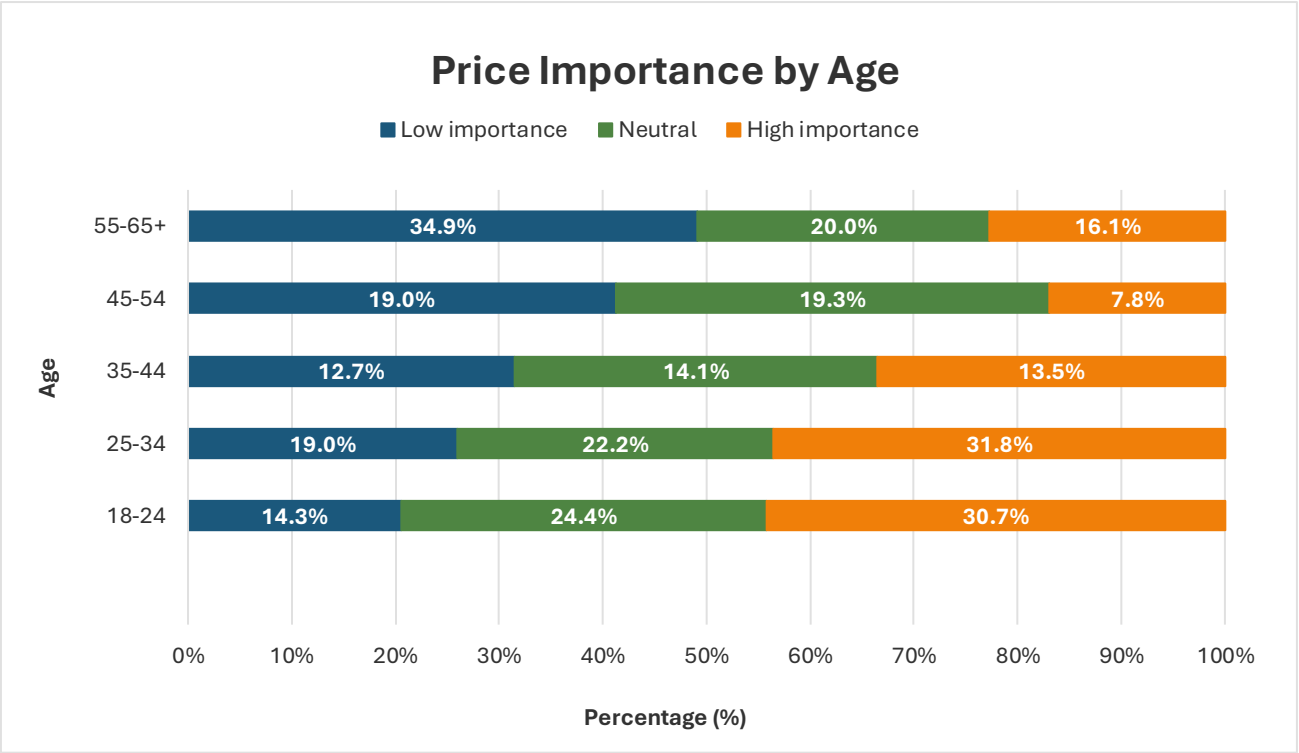


Figure 4.10: Bar graph illustrating the barriers consumers face when purchasing socially responsible fresh produce. Respondents could select up to three barriers. Counts reflect total selections (n=669), not the number of respondents.

4.4.3.1 Barrier 1: Price

The primary obstacle to turning moral intentions into actions was found to be economic constraints. According to earlier findings, 57.7% of respondents stated that they would be willing to pay extra for fair salaries and safe working conditions for workers, representing a significant decline from the 81-89% who previously supported social responsibility ideals in theory. Analysis of demographics revealed that generational and occupational disparities ($\chi^2(8)=26.927$, $p<0.001$; $\chi^2(4)=10.879$, $p=0.028$) suggest that economic conditions significantly affect consumers' ability to meet their social responsibility intentions. This is consistent with research by Aertsens et al. (2011) and De Pelsmacker et al. (2005), which indicates that economic conditions influence actual decisions. Figure 4.11 demonstrates that consumers aged 18 to 34 exhibit heightened sensitivity to cost, while older cohorts, specifically those aged 55 and above, display a more consistent distribution.



(8)=26.927, p<0.001

Figure 4.11: Stacked bar graph illustrating price importance by age group.

With respect to employment status (Table 4.11), no students rated price as unimportant, indicating pronounced economic vulnerability among this group, with all being categorised as having neutral (31%) or high (69%) importance. The distributions among employed and non-working respondents were more balanced; however, the lack of students in the 'low importance' category indicates significant price sensitivity among younger consumers without stable income. Student status was most prevalent among younger age groups (18-34), and unemployment was most prevalent among older (55+) cohorts, reflecting life stages characterised by unstable or limited income[8]. Thus, reluctance to pay more for socially responsible products stems from financial constraints rather than from a lack of ethical commitment. Younger and unemployed individuals experience the highest cost pressures, whereas financially secure groups exhibit greater flexibility in translating social values into purchasing behaviour.

[8] See Table A.2 in Appendix A.

Table 4.10: Crosstab showing price importance by employment status.

		Employment Status		
		Employed	Not working	Student
Price	High importance	156	16	20
		48.8%	39.0%	69.0%
	Neutral	112	14	9
		35.0%	34.1%	31.0%
	Low importance	52	11	0
		16.3%	26.8%	0.0%
	Total	320	41	29
		100%	100%	100%

$\chi^2(4)=10.879, p=0.028$

According to the qualitative findings, financial limitations are the most common and ingrained barrier to socially responsible food purchasing (20 references). The stakeholders repeatedly linked consumer decision-making to the structural affordability of imported goods and the escalating costs of living. A Lidl representative observed that *"Price sensitivity, the perception that socially responsible products are more expensive, remains a significant barrier"*. Xuereb reinforced this interpretation: *"value for money remains the most important way people choose. The cost of living in Malta and worldwide has increased dramatically. People are making conscious choices of switching to cheaper products, maybe less fresh, probably less healthy"*. This emotion, unlike moral disengagement, places ethical consumption within a larger context of related concerns, such as affordability. Ciantar echoed this interpretation by citing a real-world example from the supermarket, where customers *"would want local potatoes, not foreign net potatoes, but if the prices are too high, they will go for the foreign potatoes"*. Participant 1 further explained that *"When prices change, [a significant amount of people] immediately turn against the farmers"*. The disparity was addressed*: "Although people often claim they are willing to make sacrifices for the environment, in practice, they are not willing to pay more",* highlighting that the dominance of economic objectives is not due to a lack of values on the part of consumers, but instead to the fact that responsible solutions are frequently out of reach. When combined, these viewpoints reveal that price is a structural and behavioural barrier resulting from systemic inequalities in supply chains and household economics. The evidence suggests a situation in which structural

affordability is absent but moral willingness is present, pointing to the potential for policy interventions to bridge this gap.

A Lidl spokesperson noted that *"volume is always the issue … local produce cannot meet consistent demand"* and that *"only a limited number of items are produced in the large volumes necessary to consistently supply our national network of stores"*. This view, which reflects the limited market presence of small producers, is supported by quantitative data indicating that nearly 39% of respondents rely on supermarkets as their primary source of produce.

Malta's reliance on imports results in more affordable foreign alternatives; however, locally produced social responsibility options typically cost more. With rising living expenses, social responsibility products are increasingly perceived as a luxury rather than a fundamental expectation. Younger consumers, confronted with rising housing costs and stagnant wages, view the disparity between their desire to support local farmers and their ability to do so as an economic challenge rather than a moral shortcoming. Consumers are not disregarding SR; they are making choices based on their financial capabilities.

4.4.3.2 Barrier 2: Convenience

Both qualitative and quantitative findings indicate that the inconvenience stems from the demands of modern lifestyles and existing supply chain limitations, which significantly hinder consumers' ability to buy socially responsible fresh produce in Malta. This problem often takes precedence over what consumers claim are their ethical goals, and significantly contributes to the intention-action gap.

The survey data (Figure 4.12) reveal distinct metrics indicating that, although consumers express strong ethical values, the actual frequency of their actions aligned with these values is considerably diminished. Disparities are also apparent in Vermeir and Verbeke's (2006) study, which identifies the discrepancy between intention and actual conduct in sustainable food purchasing. Among the 207 respondents who faced this barrier, 179 who were concerned about socially responsible purchasing also reported that social responsibility options were not readily accessible in their immediate vicinity,

representing nearly one-third of all barriers identified in the survey. This suggests that consumers with strong ethical intentions frequently encounter physical obstacles that hinder their access to socially responsible products within their typical shopping area. Among respondents who did not avoid a seller or shop despite ethical concerns, 5.7% indicated that 'price or convenience matters more,' highlighting that convenience is a deliberate trade-off consumers consider when facing moral dilemmas. Individuals exhibiting lower levels of ethical concern, selecting 'care a little' (20.0%) or 'not at all' (12.9%), reported these barriers less frequently, suggesting that convenience may discourage those who are already indifferent to social responsibility. It serves as a significant constraint, limiting motivated individuals who face geographical or temporal limitations. The evidence implies that convenience functions not merely as a preference but rather as a structural barrier that significantly influences the boundaries of ethical action.

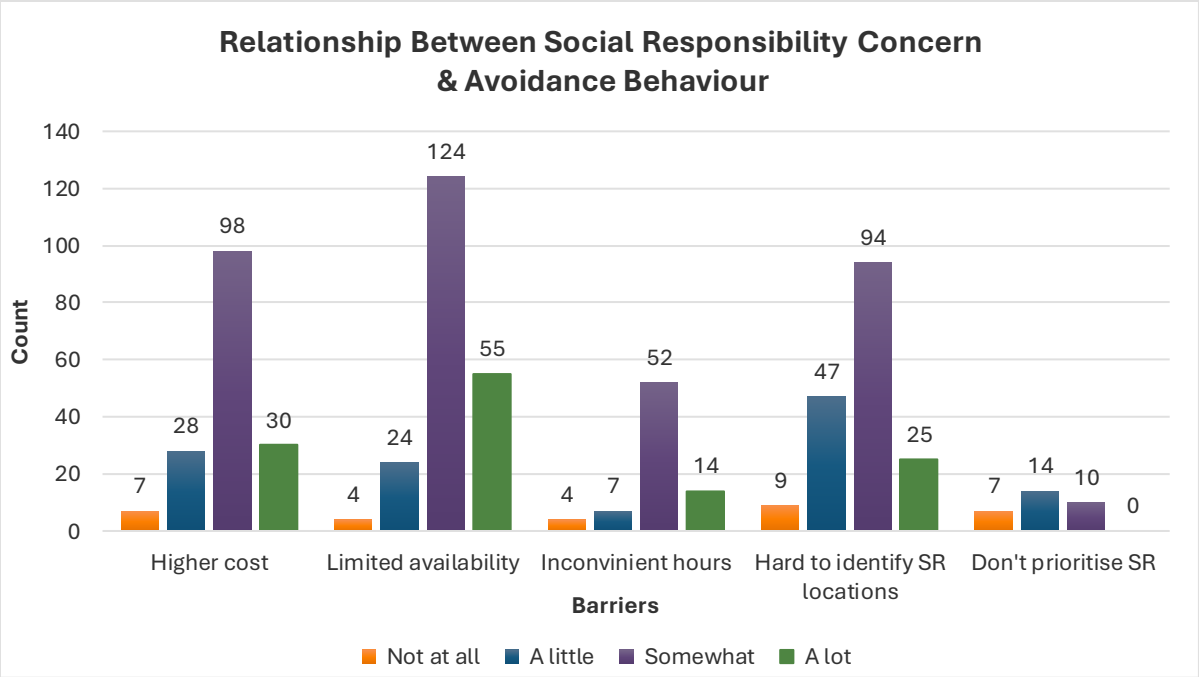


Figure 4.12: Clustered bar graph illustrating the relationship between social responsibility concern and avoidance behaviour.

Interview data revealed how this constraint is evident in practice, as individuals often have *"very busy lives"* and insufficient time for food preparation tasks, such as washing potatoes or cutting vegetables. This lack of time usually leads them to choose quick, prepared alternatives, like foreign packaged vegetable bags or frozen products. Convenience is regarded as so necessary that many individuals are willing to pay more

for it. Vella reflected in direct statements that some individuals *"do not care where their food comes from"* and *"just want convenience",* particularly among younger individuals, who prioritise ease.

The *Pitkalija* wholesale market faces systemic flaws, as shown by survey data, with only 23.5% identifying local markets as their primary source, while 39.2% use them frequently. Limited operational days, poor scheduling, and unequal treatment of small farmers create obstacles before customer selection. This farmers' market offers the shortest supply chain and is only held on Tuesdays and Saturdays, making it inconvenient for most working individuals and young families. The limited market hours prevent many working people and families from attending, forcing them to choose the easier and more convenient supermarket option, Vella stated. The gap between low market utilisation and high pro-farmer support (81%) points to systemic issues rather than apathy.

The prevalence of supermarkets, utilised by 52.3% of participants, establishes a foundational reference point for assessing intentions related to social responsibility consumption. The presence of local vendors and vans highlights the marginalisation of venues that could offer local connections and greater transparency. This situation reveals underlying systemic challenges regarding convenience, infrastructure, and accessibility that ultimately restrict consumers' ability to achieve their socially responsible objectives. Participant 1 stresses this observation, drawing attention to the emergence of a *"Bolt culture",* distinguished by a prioritisation of speed and accessibility in consumption preferences.

4.4.3.3 Barrier 3: Knowledge

Quantitative statistics underscore the significant demand for transparency and clearer information among consumers. A striking 78.2% of respondents who value transparency expressed a desire to select produce from transparent, ethical supply chains. However, this intention is consistently hindered by the challenge of identifying socially responsible sellers or products. Those who engaged with an ethically questionable shop (32.2%) reported uncertainty about the sellers' accountability. In comparison, 45.1% indicated

that uncertainty regarding the availability of social responsibility options impacts them to at least a moderate extent. The relatively low utilisation of cooperative or small-farm sources (9.1%) and the observation that 11.5% of consumers do not use any indicators highlight a deficiency in accessible or recognisable markers of socially responsible production.

Consumers' responses clearly pointed out the challenges they encounter in recognising socially responsible vendors. Araç and Çabuk (2023) found that the lack of comprehensive product information, challenges in accessing relevant data, and the existence of insufficient or questionable claims significantly hinder ethical purchasing behaviour. As seen in Figure 4.13, judgements were mainly based on indirect cues, with personal experience accounting for 28% and word of mouth for 27%. In contrast, a notable 10% acknowledged that they typically do not make any judgments about it. This reliance on informal signals reflects the lack of standardised, accessible verification systems, which significantly limits consumers' ability to obtain trustworthy information about a business's social responsibility.

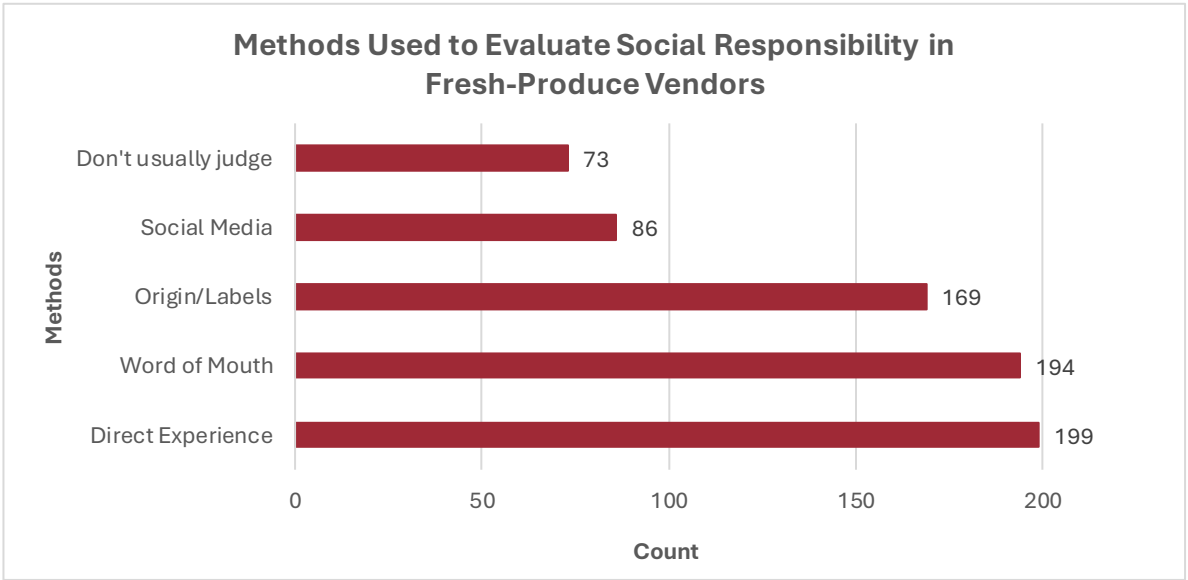


Figure 4.13: Bar graph showing methods used to assess whether fresh produce vendors are socially responsible. Respondents could select up to three methods. Counts reflect total selections (n=721), not the number of respondents (n=390).

Table 4.11 indicates a significant correlation between awareness and the socially responsible signals used ($\chi^2(6)=15.182$, $p=0.019$), suggesting that, while knowledgeable customers are more inclined to pursue ethical certifications, both demographics primarily rely on location labels as their primary indicator. Only 9.3% of respondents actively pursued Fairtrade or ethical certifications, while 4.8% sought information on safety or wages. These figures suggest that consumers tend to focus on the most prominent cues rather than those related to social considerations. Notably, consumers also demonstrated a strong preference for locality in their choices, with 34.5% actively seeking locally grown labels in Malta, rather than relying on explicit social indicators. The lack of knowledge is evident in awareness, with 45.4% of individuals unaware of the phrase 'socially responsible food,' and in application, where consumers lack practical means to discern socially responsible options, irrespective of their intent.

Table 4.11: Signals consumers look for when buying fresh produce, by awareness of the term 'socially responsible food'.

	When shopping, which social responsibility do you look for?							
	Fairtrade	Locally Grown Labels	Wage/Safety Info	Small-Farm Origin	Organic	Ask Seller Directly	Other	Total
Aware of SR	20	106	14	28	82	41	28	**319**
	6.3%	33.2%	4.4%	8.8%	25.7%	12.9%	8.8%	**100%**
Not aware of SR	50	153	22	40	105	45	16	**431**
	11.6%	35.5%	5.1%	9.3%	24.4%	10.4%	3.7%	**100%**
Total	70	259	36	68	187	86	44	**750**
	9.3%	34.5%	4.8%	9.1%	24.9%	11.5%	5.9%	**100%**

$X^2(6)=15.182$, $p=0.019$

Qualitative insights from stakeholders reveal a significant gap in public understanding of food's social aspects. It is observed that many individuals engage in habitual shopping behaviours, often lacking deliberate thought. This disengagement prevents consumers from evaluating the ethical or social implications of their choices, a situation exacerbated by a generally low level of food literacy. Borg observed that the lack of transparency in the food chain leads to *"misconceptions, misunderstandings, and myths*

related to food", with participants noting that many people fail to link their daily purchases to their broader implications. Participant 1 highlighted a specific disconnect: children believe that *"vegetables are grown on supermarket shelves",* which can be attributed to insufficient education.

Ironically, concern about food provenance typically emerges only when personal health issues arise, suggesting that social responsibility is seldom a primary consideration. Stakeholders also emphasised that the lack of knowledge should not be attributed to consumer negligence, but instead to systemic failures in disseminating information: *"You cannot really blame consumers… how are they meant to know what is imported and what is local?"* A supermarket representative pointed out that the multitude of certifications and labels can confuse, making it harder for shoppers to identify and trust which products are genuinely responsible and properly labelled. It was observed that current traceability systems are perceived as limited, primarily focused on food safety, while neglecting the broader social aspects of production. This gap leaves consumers without the essential resources to make informed ethical choices.

Borg emphasised that numerous individuals fail to recognise that their choices have repercussions. He stated that whenever one purchases a vegetable or fruit, it goes beyond a simple food purchase; it represents a vote for a particular system and a specific set of values: *"We vote for a story"*. Collectively, these insights reveal that insufficient education, weak food literacy, and opaque market information form a structural knowledge barrier that significantly contributes to the intention-action gap.

This knowledge deficit, deeply ingrained in cultural attitudes, is a challenge that stakeholders play a crucial role in addressing. Stakeholders have noted that foreign products are often given more value than local ones, perpetuating an 'island mentality' that undermines the importance of supporting local farmers and diminishes respect for Maltese produce. The education system, a significant contributor to this issue, is failing to impart crucial competencies, including nutrition, food origins, agricultural practices, and fundamental life skills. This lack of early education not only affects children but also entire families, perpetuating generational disparities in comprehension. These findings collectively underscore a systemic educational shortcoming that severely limits

consumers' ability to make social responsibility food choices. This practice forces consumers to rely on *"going behind the scenes"* or having the *"will to actually want to learn more"* to verify the social dimension of a business, which most people are unable or unwilling to do.

4.4.3.4 Barriers: Summary

This research has identified three primary barriers that may hinder individuals' ability to make socially responsible choices. Additionally, respondents and interviewees have highlighted secondary factors, such as scepticism towards greenwashing claims, habitual shopping patterns, and a perceived lack of individual impact. These factors are not independent constraints, but rather indicators of the underlying barriers that exist. For instance, habit signifies the optimisation of convenience, and scepticism indicates information asymmetries. Furthermore, the absence of efficient systems that encourage or facilitate socially conscious decision-making is a major factor contributing to the additional gap between intention and execution (Tamvada, 2020). By addressing these issues related to price, availability, accessibility, and information gaps, these derivative barriers can be significantly mitigated.

Malta presents distinct challenges for adopting socially responsible food consumption practices due to its limited geographic size and a concentrated retail sector. As a result, institutional and structural factors influence both producers' participation in local markets and the availability of goods for consumers. Based on 159 qualitative research references, four interconnected structural challenges were identified: small-scale production, reliance on imports, cultural attitudes, and institutional failures (Figure 4.13). These factors create structural limitations that restrict socially responsible purchasing before individuals make their choices.

4.5 Systemic & Structural Constraints

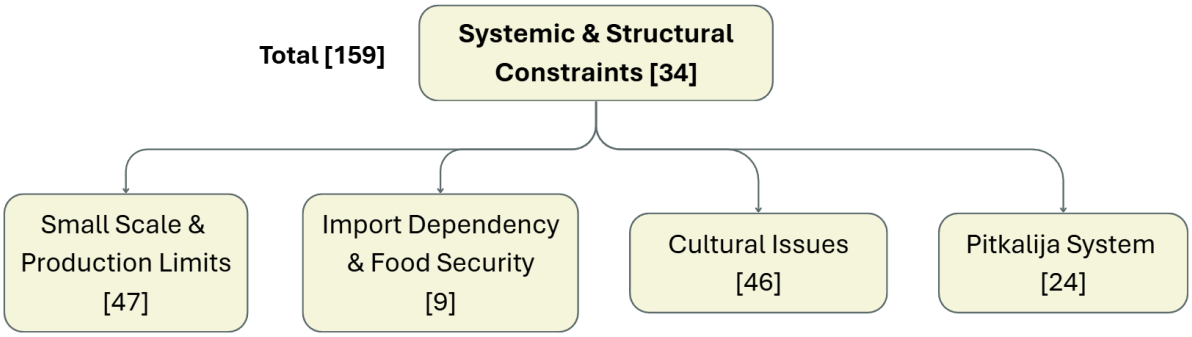


Figure 4.14: Thematic map highlighting factors that contribute to systemic and structural constraints.

4.5.1 Small-Scale Production Limitations

The study's interviewees consistently highlighted Malta's fragmented agricultural structure as a significant barrier to attaining market competitiveness. The intensive manual labour and the limited field areas of smallholder farms restrict production efficiency and capacity: *"Our fields are small … the work is very hard. We do everything by hand",* as described by Micallef. These issues prevent farmers from attaining economies of scale or maintaining reliable supply levels. The lack of an educational framework and coherent food taxonomy hinders initiatives aimed at fostering respect for local farmers. Brincat and Borg highlighted a cultural focus on *"feasts, celebrations, and fireworks"* in Malta, unlike countries such as Italy, where there is a strong appreciation for both culture and cuisine: *"they highly value their culture and their food"*.

Institutional requirements further intensify these challenges because some retailers demand Global Good Agricultural Practice (G.A.P.) certification, which many farmers find prohibitively expensive and administratively complex, as Vella stated. These scale constraints are further worsened by climate variability, storms that damage infrastructure, and droughts that impact yields (7 references). The overlapping perspectives of farmers, merchants, and policymakers reveal how Malta's limited agricultural area imposes structural limits on consumer choice. Therefore, small-scale operations continue to present a structural obstacle, regardless of the aims of consumer social responsibility.

4.5.2 The *Pitkalija* System

Participants often criticised Malta's primary fresh produce hub, the *Pitkalija* wholesale market system, for being inefficient and outdated, as it was created to connect farmers with merchants and customers. Concerns raised by stakeholders included a pricing system that penalises smaller producers and irregular working hours. Some interviewees emphasised that intermediaries sometimes earn a disproportionate share of the profits compared to farmers. Xuereb pointed this out among the fundamental design flaws:

"Our Pitkali was meant for farmers to bring produce without caring about sales… that model did not work because the Pitkali worked only on Monday and Friday. Farmers, disappointed that intermediaries made money while they took the risk, resorted to selling directly".

Brincat highlighted a lack of transparency and instances of *"green box"* exploitation, which damage public confidence, noting that *"when prices of Maltese fruit rose, individuals filled green crates with imported fruit and sold it as Maltese"*. This practice compels consumers to engage in independent investigation and rely on having the *"will to actually want to learn more"* or *"going behind the scenes"* to verify the social aspect of the produce they are purchasing, which most individuals are either unwilling or unable to do. Micallef and Vella both highlight that the *Pitkalija* system benefits larger producers, with Vella noting that it *"favours larger farms that can deliver early"*. The current market scheduling is structured to accommodate the needs of large agricultural businesses; still, the schedule places a considerable strain on smaller family farms. Micallef stated that night trading *"caters to their interests, not those of small farmers like us"*.

4.5.3 Import Dependency & Food Security

A significant constraint identified in the interviews was Malta's substantial reliance on imported food, which is expected to account for approximately 80% of its fresh and preserved food supply (Soler, 2023), reinforcing the quantitative dominance of supermarkets. Xuereb emphasised the importance of this dependency, warning that such reliance renders Malta more vulnerable to food security issues, as the country *"risks not producing enough food, fresh or otherwise, to feed its population"*. Although

this dependency offers access to readily available, low-cost products, it renders the country's national supply susceptible to external forces beyond its control. Other stakeholders indicated that insufficient cold storage facilities might lead to product deterioration within two days, hence increasing reliance on imported items to meet market demand. The extent of this reliance became vividly apparent during the COVID-19 pandemic, as participants reflected on the disruptions caused by port closures, revealing the fragility of national food security. Marika echoed this view, stating, if an event occurs internationally, *"every country will keep its goods for itself … who will give us food?",* with Vella observing that the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the COVID-19 outbreak led to price hikes and supply chain disruptions, necessitating a renewed dependence on local farmers.

4.5.4 Cultural Attitudes

Historical and cultural heritage play a significant role in shaping perceptions and consumption habits of local products. With 45 coded references, cultural concerns emerged as the most common contextual barrier. Many interviewees stated that Malta's colonial history has shaped food habits that conflict with the use of local produce. Borg noted that the ongoing *"British diet"* sustains a structural demand for imports, often regarded as superior in status, reflecting what Xuereb described as *"our colonial mentality"*.

The generational evolution of Maltese food culture was discussed, with older generations valuing traditional Maltese produce and farming practices, and later generations influenced by imported and media-driven diets. Among younger customers, he noted indications of rejuvenation, who are progressively prioritising environmental considerations. This comment highlights a shifting societal trajectory, as well as the emergence of environmental awareness from conventional food identification. Brincat and Borg highlight a cultural focus on *"feasts, celebrations, and fireworks"* in Malta, unlike countries such as Italy, where there is a strong appreciation for both culture and cuisine. The lack of a distinct culinary identity weakens national ties to local produce and sustains a disconnection between consumers and production systems. However, policymakers are working to redefine *"Maltese food not just as food, but as part of a*

better lifestyle" through cultural collaborations, as Vella stated. It was argued that *"Malta does not promote healthy eating",* noting that consumers are primarily influenced by marketing and cost rather than by value, nutrition, or freshness.

Other participants observed a growing cultural disconnection from food sources, with Borg noting that "we have lost the connection we had with food" compared to our grandparents, who *"grew some of their own food"* during times of scarcity. The lack of an educational framework and coherent food taxonomy hinders initiatives aimed at fostering respect for local farmers. The absence of a distinct culinary identity weakens national ties to local produce and sustains a disconnection between consumers and production systems. Quantitative findings support these cultural trends, with 81% of respondents expressing a moral obligation to support local farmers. However, more than half (52.3%) identified supermarkets, which are mainly stocked with imported goods, as their primary source of produce. This disparity suggests that established cultural preferences for convenience and the perceived quality of imports often outweigh ethical considerations.

4.5.5 Systemic & Structural Constraints: Summary

The four structural issues are interrelated, limiting social responsibility consumption before individual decision-making. A causal chain emerges as insufficient small-scale manufacturing fails to meet demand, resulting in a 70-80% dependence on imports that supply supermarkets with foreign products. As a result, consumers consider supermarkets their main shopping venue, whereas only 23.5% typically use local markets, and 67.4% purchase directly from farmers infrequently. Cultural factors reinforce this framework, as intergenerational food knowledge erodes, colonial mindsets regard imports as superior, and a convenience-oriented culture sustains import-dependent practices.

4.6 Bridging the Gap: Solutions & Initiatives

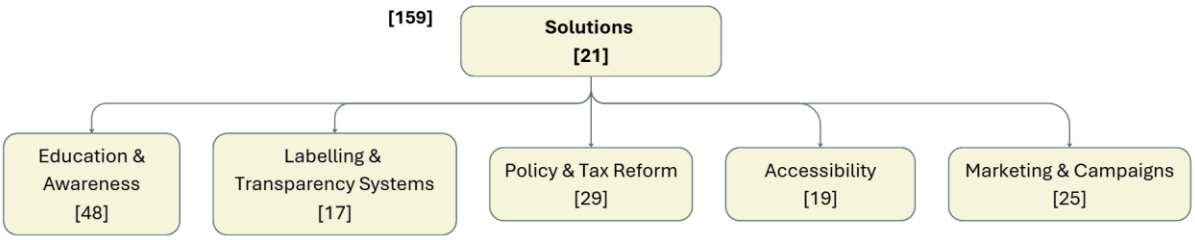


Figure 4.15: Thematic map highlighting solutions for the intention-action gap.

Moving forward, it is essential to implement targeted and systemic interventions to empower consumers to consistently follow through on their expressed intentions and address current limitations. There is a consensus among stakeholders and consumers that achieving significant change requires a systematic approach involving collaboration across educational initiatives, market frameworks, and policy adjustments. The primary objective is to guarantee that the social responsibility option is the most affordable, accessible, and visible choice available to consumers.

Figure 4.16: Thematic word cloud of stakeholder-suggested solutions to bridge the intention-action gap.

4.6.1 Education & Awareness Campaigns

Education and awareness were identified as the most suggested intervention, with 35% respondents of the 232 consumers who provided potential interventions for public campaigns. Participants expressed a clear interest in obtaining further education, specifically regarding “more education about where food comes from” and the benefits

of purchasing locally, reflecting a significant grassroots demand for knowledge. This consumer priority aligns with expert insights; for instance, Vella noted that education plays a crucial role, as many consumers support social responsibility practices but fail to implement them consistently. The correlation between consumer and stakeholder perspectives suggests that educational interventions would benefit from support on both the supply and demand sides.

Beyond general awareness, food literacy and cooking skills were consistently recognised by stakeholders as essential deficiencies that impede consumers' ability to engage with fresh local produce. Borg characterised food literacy as being at a *"very low"* level, linking this decline to the breakdown of knowledge transfer. This shift has resulted in younger generations perceiving food mainly as *"a commodity"*. Vella emphasised the need for *"educating people, especially young people, on how to cook and use local produce"* and spoke about experiential programs, such as cooking workshops that provide recipes and offer taste experiences, which may have a significant impact on their culinary education.

The generational trends in food knowledge were also identified with Xuereb claiming that the younger generation is *"much more understanding and appreciative of the value of fresh produce"* and is actively *"influencing their parents to make the right choices."* Nevertheless, the significance of incorporating food education in the early stages of life to address the deficiency in food literacy was discussed. Brincat proposed that educational institutions incorporate *"nutrition and life lessons, such as how to grow vegetables ... in addition to academic subjects",* a view echoed by consumers who called for such topics to be included *"in the curriculum" from a "young age"*. Additionally, Micallef noted that bringing *"children from schools to explain how things work"* onto the farm and offering them practical experience and knowledge makes a substantial contribution to educating both the children and their families. This is directly supported by customers who recommended weekend *"open days"* and *"school outings to local farms "* to introduce kids to the creation of local food.

MFA has also been implementing experiential learning initiatives, including "events to encourage people to buy and to understand how they can use the products", as well as organising pop-up farmers' markets at locations such as the University of Malta. These

programs have been quite successful in boosting participation. For example, ‘Festival Ċel Malta’ far exceeded expectations by attracting over 5,000 attendees. The success of combining education with community celebrations to support local, socially conscious food systems is further demonstrated by other events hosted by the MFA, including the Imnarja festival, the Valletta Local Food Festival, and Festa Ikel Malti.

Another recurring theme was the need for widespread educational outreach, emphasising the importance of educating the public about making socially conscious food choices. A multi-channel communication approach that included *"social media and TV campaigns"* and "*infographic flyers sent directly to each home"* was recommended by experts, with social media being cited as being especially "key" to public involvement. This aligns with Chamcham et al.’s (2024) study, which states that social media allows consumers to adopt a comprehensive and proactive approach to food consumption. To highlight *"why they should buy local and why it is their responsibility to do so”,* Vella urged the need for additional nationwide campaigns. Ciantar pointed to earlier campaigns, such as "My Life is Potato”, as practical illustrations of influencing public opinion and increasing awareness.

Direct engagement between customers and producers has emerged as a crucial approach to enhancing awareness and trust. Participant 1 noted that farmers' markets provide “the shortest supply chain, where the consumer speaks directly with the producer”. This direct interaction not only fosters curiosity but also leads the MFA to place *“greater emphasis on the educational aspect of these activities”*. Interviewees claimed that these interactions mitigate scepticism about official labelling systems, a viewpoint mirrored by customers who indicated a desire to *“talk to the vendors and local farmers, look into their practices, and learn about what it takes to grow the food we eat”*. These interactions also promote *“storytelling”,* substituting the anonymity of food for human tales that cultivate a more profound *“personal connection”* to the product, as Vella articulates. This might be enhanced by using internet video footage in which farmers recount their experiences, as Milidoni (2024) shows. Additional recommendations included showcasing video elements in retail environments that illustrate farmers' efforts from the field to the store, thereby enhancing transparency and confidence.

Education is a high-priority solution, as evidenced by the alignment between experts' awareness of knowledge gaps and consumers' demand for education. Despite declared intentions, many consumers struggle to identify socially conscious products due to informational barriers (Grunert et al., 2014). However, education programs may help close this gap and build the food literacy needed to overcome knowledge and convenience barriers (Vermeir & Verbeke, 2006).

4.6.2 Labelling & Transparency Systems

The widespread use of confusing or limited labelling underscores the need for regulatory intervention to ensure that consumers receive transparent, trustworthy information. Table 4.12 indicates that when asked about trust signals, 80.3% of survey respondents agreed that seeing ethical labels made them feel more confident in their purchases, with only 3.9% disagreeing. Similarly, 77.7% indicated that consumers trusted the vendor's social responsibility claims more when vendors displayed local-origin information. This positive customer response to clear labelling systems confirms that information-based treatments may be beneficial. This trend is also evident among the 18 respondents (7.8%) of the 232 consumers who answered the open-ended question about possible interventions, who explicitly indicated the need for more precise or uniform labelling systems. Proposed recommendations include requests for *"better labelling so we know where things come from", "clear labels showing if workers are treated fairly",* and *"certification that is easy to understand"*. This aligns with external research indicating that certifications and labels serve as reliable indicators that reduce perceived consumer risk by simplifying complex production criteria into easily identifiable brands (Truong et al., 2021; Wu et al. 2021).

Table 4.12: Frequency table showing the consumer agreement with trust signals in fresh produce purchasing.

	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Total
Ethical labels increase confidence in a purchase	313	62	15	390
	80.30%	15.90%	3.90%	100%
Local-origin information increases trust in a vendor	303	73	14	390
	77.70%	18.70%	3.60%	100%

Expert stakeholders highlighted consumer apprehensions by emphasising inadequacies in Malta's existing labelling mechanisms. A representative for the MFA said that efforts are underway to create a uniform label that indicates a product is local, with improved traceability mechanisms, such as barcodes or QR codes, that disclose information about the product's source, including the harvest date, the specific farm, and the farmer who handled the crops. In conjunction with the introduction of digital technologies, regulatory measures have been introduced to improve customer confidence: *"a new law was recently passed, making it illegal to use the green [Pitkali] boxes for anything other than local produce"*. This addresses prior instances of misleading practices where imported fruit was marketed in local packaging.

The correlation between professional insight and consumer preferences suggests significant opportunities for implementing improved traceability and labelling systems. As previously indicated, even though consumers express a willingness to endorse them, information gaps impede individuals from identifying socially responsible products. Consumers have shown a willingness to adopt more transparent labelling, and experts validate the practicality of implementing these systems. Nonetheless, achieving uniform labelling and digital traceability is hindered by the unique characteristics of Malta's agricultural sector, particularly the significant costs associated with verification processes, limited resources, and small-scale operations.

4.6.3 Infrastructure & Market Accessibility

Infrastructure improvements were widely acknowledged as essential to addressing previously identified convenience and accessibility challenges. In response to Q31, 23 participants advocated for enhanced support for local farmers and increased access to fresh produce, which includes extended or evening hours, additional farmers' markets in diverse and low-income neighbourhoods, and services such as home delivery or *"farm to door"* initiatives. The restricted availability and inconvenience of local stores and farmers' markets, which often prevent customers from acting on their ethical intentions, are addressed by this advocacy (Vermeir & Verbeke, 2006). This draws attention to the limited availability and inconvenience of nearby merchants and farmers' markets, which often prevent consumers from fulfilling their moral commitments (Vermeir & Verbeke,

2006). Vella encouraged enhancing the accessibility of existing markets and creating new ones. In contrast, Brincat criticised the current biweekly market model, which is limited to Birgu and Ta' Qali, and suggested that markets should be held weekly in the most populous towns. Nonetheless, MFA deliberated on establishing additional ports of sale to facilitate direct sales from farmers, especially those organised in cooperatives, to consumers.

Since supermarkets serve as the principal shopping destination for 39% of participants, stakeholders have underscored the need to incorporate local food into mainstream retail. Consumers emphasised that visibility is crucial, advising shops to position local items prominently and clearly distinguish them from imports, particularly in mixed displays. This is corroborated by research showing that physical attributes such as product placement and signage serve as external signals (stimuli) that affect customers' internal feelings and purchase decisions (responses) (Lee & Yun, 2015). Leviten-Reid & Zepeda (2004) caution that consumers may perceive local items available in supermarkets as less genuine than those offered directly by manufacturers.

4.6.4 Economic & Policy Interventions

Economic obstacles, particularly price sensitivity, emerged as significant barriers, preventing customers from aligning their purchasing choices with their social values. In responses to Q31, 14 participants (11.7%) clearly mentioned affordability concerns, calling for "*more accessible prices"* through strategies such as government subsidies and price incentives. Although 57.7% of respondents indicated a willingness to pay more for fair wages and safe working conditions, the intention-behaviour gap showed that cost remained the primary driver for many individuals. This corroborates established results that financial constraints persist as the primary obstacle to fulfilling socially responsible purchase intentions (Aertsens et al., 2011).

Stakeholders ascribed these obstacles to systemic disparities in the existing tax and market structures. Xuereb stated that Malta's *"taxonomy does not promote healthy eating",* arguing for a system that would facilitate the subsidisation of fresh produce. He advocated differential taxation to influence consumer behaviour, supporting local

agriculture while imposing taxes on unhealthy foods and imported products to account for their transportation and environmental costs. Consumers reiterated similar concepts, advocating for taxes on ethically sourced items, reduced VAT, tax exemptions, decreased farmer fees, and consumer coupons for organic and locally grown fruit, all aimed at helping lower-income people. These structural changes were deemed essential for reviving a faltering industry.

To increase affordability, the government has implemented financial measures that allow farmers to sell directly to customers at reduced tax rates of around 5% through the MFA's Direct Sales Platform, which has been extended to encompass almost all agricultural goods. According to FOE (2017), facilitating direct sales options for farmers may enhance confidence and enable producers to adapt their marketing more effectively to meet customer demands. Through seller registration and transaction monitoring, this approach can enhance farmer profitability, reduce intermediary costs, and improve overall market transparency.

The correlation between consumer concerns about affordability and existing policy measures suggests a widespread recognition of the importance of economic factors in bridging the intention-action gap. Financial incentives, while beneficial, do not suffice if consumers lack awareness of subsidies, direct sales platforms and tax-advantaged local produce. This highlights the necessity for cohesive strategies that combine educational programs with economic measures, enhanced labelling, and improved retail visibility to ensure that affordable social responsibility choices are both recognisable and attainable for all consumers.

4.7 Synthesis

4.7.1 Integrated Interpretation Across Mixed-Methods Data

Table 4.13: Conceptual synthesis matrix

Theme	Quantitative Insight	Qualitative Insight	Relationship	Integrated Interpretation
Actual Consumer Behaviour	Supermarket reliance is dominant, while direct purchasing from farmers is limited and inconsistent socially responsible behaviours are present.	Stakeholders observed the prevalence of convenience-driven behaviours and a lack of sustained behavioural commitment.	Strongly Aligned	Purchasing routines are predominantly influenced by structural circumstances rather than value hierarchies, hence reinforcing the intention-action gap.
Intention-Action Gap	Respondents indicated that their shopping decisions do not always reflect their declared ideals, despite having good moral intentions,	Stakeholders state that convenience culture, affordability and a lack of education and transparency has created this divide and normalised it.	Aligned & Compatible	The gap between intentions and actions is exacerbated by convenience norms, financial pressures, and a lack of knowledge and transparency, rather than by a lack of moral concern.
Barrier 1: Price	Cost sensitivity profoundly influences socially responsible buying, particularly among economically disadvantaged people.	Experts attribute this price sensitivity to broader cost-of-living pressures and market dynamics that favour imported items.	Aligned	The disparity between intentions and behaviour is mostly influenced by financial capability, rather than diminished ethical commitment, since the market inherently prices ethical options higher

Barrier 2: Convenience	Restricted availability, restricted operation hours, and accessibility limitations hinder customers' ability to carry out socially responsible intents.	Experts describe social responsibility-friendly stores as fundamentally inconvenient, while supermarkets seamlessly adapt with everyday habits.	Compatible	The results suggest that convenience overrides ethical intentions because structural design makes socially responsible solutions consistently more challenging to obtain.
Barrier 3: Knowledge	Consumers find it challenging to identify sellers with socially responsible produce and express uncertainty regarding verification processes.	Experts highlight the issues of low food literacy, unclear labelling, and non-transparent supply chains that erode consumer trust.	Strongly Aligned	The barrier arises from systemic informational failures, resulting in motivated consumers finding it challenging to act on.
Institutional System Failures	There is little usage of socially conscious venues and market trends show structural limitations.	Stakeholders point out structural inefficiencies in infrastructure, labelling, and distribution.	Aligned & expansion	The observed behavioural patterns are the result of institutional flaws as the systems that restrict opportunities for social responsibility.

4.7.2 Methodological Synthesis

The convergent mixed-methods design strengthened the findings by illustrating how quantitative patterns are embedded within broader social, cultural, and institutional contexts. The survey data provided a comprehensive understanding of the scale and significance of behaviours and attitudes, while the interviews elucidated the mechanisms and contextual factors behind them. Integration across themes was most apparent through complementarity: quantitative data depicted consumer behaviours, while qualitative insights explained the underlying reasons for these patterns. Variations were minor and mainly related to conceptual nuances; for example, interviews uncovered cultural and interpretive ambiguities that contributed to the survey's observed lack of awareness. The study indicates that consumer behaviour is closely linked to structural constraints and highlights the importance of triangulation in understanding the complexity of the intention-action gap.

4.8 Limitations

In empirical research, it is essential to acknowledge specific methodological constraints during the design, data collection, and interpretation of findings. The limitations are primarily associated with sampling, data collection methods, and the integration of quantitative and qualitative components. The following accuracy factors were identified throughout the study:

1. The questionnaire was administered in August 2025, a period when the majority of students and educators are absent from the University. Consequently, the likelihood that registrar recipients would actively monitor their university email accounts was minimal, which may have undermined the effectiveness of this distribution channel. Moreover, the timing of data collection may have affected participants' responses. To address this constraint, the survey was also distributed via informal networks, and the results are considered indicative rather than statistically representative.

2. The use of non-probability sampling, involving snowball and convenience sampling, as well as voluntary participation, may have diminished the sample's representativeness and constrained the generalisability of the findings to the broader population. This limitation was partially mitigated by using an exploratory study approach and triangulating quantitative survey results with qualitative interview data to improve contextual and interpretative validity.

3. The format of the online survey might have lowered participation among individuals, who tend to engage less with digital platforms or encounter web-based recruitment materials. As a result, the sample may under-represent demographics, thereby biasing the results in favour of more digitally engaged customers. In order to address this limitation, no claims of population-level representation were made, and demographic trends were evaluated with caution.

4. Being dependent on self-reported questionnaire data poses the possibility of response bias, especially social desirability bias, as subjects may not provide entirely accurate responses but instead offer more socially acceptable ones (Althubaiti, 2016). This risk was minimised as the questionnaire employed neutral question phrasing, anonymous data collection, and the survey results were cross-referenced results with qualitative interview insights.

5. Although purposive expert sampling facilitated the recruitment of individuals with extensive knowledge, it limited the generalisability of the findings to contexts outside the Maltese fresh produce context (Etikan et al., 2016). By triangulating the data with consumer survey information and presenting the findings as context-specific insights that could be applied to other small-island agricultural systems, this constraint was mitigated.

6. The self-designed survey questionnaire only underwent face validation and formal content validation was not conducted, which could have affected measurement accuracy. However, the internal coherence of the data was maintained through

methodological triangulation, ongoing refinement, and careful instrument development.

7. Finally, company representatives may emphasise favourable sustainability practices during interviews, possibly influenced by a positive self-presentation bias. This limitation was addressed through a thorough analysis of interview data, comparing organisational claims with consumer survey results and wider market insights.

5 Conclusion

This research examined the impact of social responsibility on consumer behaviour in Malta's fresh produce market, with a particular focus on the disparity between ethical intentions and actual purchasing decisions. The study employed a convergent mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative data from a survey of 390 consumers with qualitative insights from semi-structured interviews with eight key industry experts to assess the extent of the gap and explore the complex interactions among behavioural, economic, and systemic factors shaping consumer choices in the unique Maltese context. The main findings in relation to this study's research questions are outlined below:

1. Awareness of the term 'socially responsible food' is limited, with about half of respondents indicating familiarity, and this familiarity was significantly correlated with higher levels of education. Stakeholder interviews showed that, despite this awareness, social responsibility rarely influences purchasing decisions consciously or as a primary factor. While local consumers consistently demonstrate strong ethical respect for social principles, these principles are rarely prioritised in practice. This is mainly due to an unclear or inaccurate understanding of social responsibility, which is often interpreted as the more tangible idea of buying locally. It is regarded as aspirational rather than a clear or systematic criterion in actual buying behaviour. A comparable study by Carrington et al. (2014) indicated that ethical consumerism is an emerging trend, and yet, people with ethical inclinations rarely make ethical purchases. Similarly, Auger & Devinney (2007) found that while many consumers advocate ethical consumerism, they seldom translate these principles into action at the point of purchase.

2. Maltese consumers rely heavily on locally produced produce as a proxy for social responsibility when purchasing fresh fruit and vegetables. Survey participants overwhelmingly regarded 'locally grown' labels as indicators of socially responsible practices, and experts revealed that this association reflects an intuitive, though

indirect, inference made by the public. Local origin emerged as the most potent and trusted social signal, surpassing formal certifications and serving as a cognitive shortcut for a wide range of positive attributes, including freshness, quality, and ethical production. This reliance on proximity contrasts with respondents' strong support for broader social principles, such as fair treatment for producers. Nonetheless, these moral commitments do not translate into a demand for tangible social indicators, such as wage or working condition information at the point of purchase. Notably, consumers rarely place significant value on formal ethical certifications, such as the global Fairtrade mark, which aims to communicate socially responsible standards (Fairtrade International, 2018). However, the extent to which fair trade labels influence customers' perceptions of these branded food products remain unclear (Schouteten et al., 2021). Consequently, local origin becomes a strong but simplified signal, replacing a more detailed set of ethical attributes.

3. Local consumers' shopping decisions and ethical aspirations often differed, with many respondents acknowledging that their purchasing behaviours only marginally aligned with their declared ethical commitments. This disconnect was also evident in their shopping habits because supermarkets, which mostly feature imported products, remained the respondents' primary source of fresh food, despite underscoring the need to support local farmers. Conversely, buying directly from farmers, which offers greater transparency and direct support for local producers, was relatively uncommon. This pattern aligns with the findings of Onozaka et al. (2010), who observed that consumers who frequently opt to buy mainly from supermarkets rather than directly from farmers show a strong preference for 'local' products, emphasising the influence of convenience and established shopping habits. Pro-social intent seems continually overshadowed by the ease and repetitive nature of mainstream buying, according to observed trends.

4. The intention-behaviour gap arises from a range of interconnected barriers that prevent people from making socially acceptable choices. The price emerged as the most significant obstacle, particularly among younger consumers and students, who are often reluctant to pay a premium for ethically produced products. Convenience also limits activity, because busy schedules and the dominance of supermarkets make alternative shopping locations, such as farmers' markets with limited hours, less practical. The final barrier identified was insufficient knowledge, as unclear labelling and low food literacy hinder consumers' ability to select genuinely socially responsible products, leading them to rely on informal cues. Consumers and stakeholders highlighted structural obstacles to socially accountable purchasing, including inadequate public awareness, ambiguous labelling, pricing challenges, and a lack of ethical options at major retailers. These constraints suggest that locally, the gap results from structural barriers that hinder the realisation of pro-social choices, rather than from a deficiency in consumer motivation. In a comparable study, Ismael and Ploeger (2020) revealed that the predominant self-reported obstacles to purchasing organic products were limited choice, availability and financial concerns.

This study achieved all its objectives and addressed the four central research questions, revealing a consistent intention-action gap in the consumption of socially responsible fresh produce. Importantly, Maltese consumers show significant ethical concerns about the social consequences of their dietary choices. However, their ability to turn these convictions into action is consistently hindered by ongoing institutional, economic, and informational barriers. The gap between consumers' stated values and their buying behaviour appears not to stem from a lack of moral commitment but from a food environment that makes it difficult to find, recognise, or afford socially responsible options.

5.1.1 Recommendations

The findings of this study clearly show that bridging the gap between intention and action requires more than appeals to personal morality. It demands institutional reform that shifts responsibility from consumers to a market where ethical choices are also the simplest, most transparent, and most affordable. The following recommendations are directly based on the research findings.

5.1.1.1 For Policymakers & Governmental Agencies

- A comprehensive and reliable local labelling system should be established with a unified official label to confirm that producers comply with fair labour practices and meet the social aspects of ESG criteria (Brukało et al., 2024; Fairtrade International, 2017).

- This national certification system for ethically produced local goods needs to be backed by independent third-party verification (Hainmueller et al., 2011). It will provide more explicit guidance to consumers, enabling more informed, socially responsible purchasing choices (Schouteten et al., 2021).

- Utilising the OECD's (2025) acknowledgement that targeted subsidies and tax incentives can effectively promote sustainable agricultural practices; governments could expand these mechanisms to enhance the social aspect of sustainability by offering direct incentives to farmers who adhere to verified socially responsible standards and reducing the price disparity for local ethical products.

- Coupled with enforcement mechanisms and penalties for misleading ethical claims, these measures would enhance the affordability and competitiveness of socially responsible options while addressing the current regulatory oversight gap.

5.1.1.2 For Educators & Society

- Food literacy should be incorporated into the national curriculum by adding specific modules on local agricultural systems, nutrition, and practical cooking skills in both primary and secondary education. Integrating these components would address the fundamental knowledge gaps and the inadequate levels of food literacy identified in this study.

- A nationwide public awareness campaign should be launched to enhance understanding of social responsibility beyond the narrow notion of 'local' (Vidgen & Gallegos, 2014). These campaigns should utilise both traditional and digital media to share compelling stories that humanise farmers (Milidoni, 2024) and strengthen the link between consumer choices, agricultural sustainability, and Malta's food security vulnerabilities.

- User-friendly resources, including mobile applications, QR codes and websites, should be developed to assist consumers in interpreting certification labels, recognising greenwashing, and identifying genuine socially responsible practices in fresh produce.

5.1.1.3 For Retailers & the Private Sector

- Retailers and producer associations should work together to improve direct-to-consumer methods, such as farm-to-door delivery services or subscription boxes of local, seasonal fruit and vegetables, to remove convenience barriers and align socially responsible shopping with modern consumers' desire for simplicity and accessibility (AbuSabha & Gargin, 2018; Sitaker et al., 2020).

- More retailers should emulate Lidl and fairly integrate local farmers into their supply chains by offering long-term procurement contracts that guarantee fair rates and account for the increased costs of Maltese agricultural production, thereby enhancing access to socially responsible products for a greater number of

individuals. Support from retailers through technical and financial assistance is crucial for strengthening these efforts, helping small-scale farmers meet essential quality, safety, and certification standards and thereby improving their market access. Furthermore, merchants should expand their CSR initiatives beyond high-profile projects to include smaller suppliers, ensuring that local producers share a greater equitable share of corporate responsibility.

5.1.1.4 Future Studies

- The employment of longitudinal methods to examine how consumers' behaviours and actual intentions develop in response to economic shifts, educational initiatives, or policy changes is warranted. Longitudinal studies are increasingly employed in sustainable-consumption research to examine the temporal changes in consumer behaviour in response to evolving circumstances (Puntiroli et al., 2022).

- Simultaneously, experimental studies conducted in retail settings can provide causal evidence by analysing how interventions influence actual purchasing decisions.

- Comparative studies of other Mediterranean or small island nations should be carried out to assess policy effectiveness, cultural impacts, and similar structural constraints within import-dependent food systems.

- Future investigations should evaluate the impact of proposed policy measures on local production, consumer behaviour, and the overall sustainability of Malta's agricultural sector.

- Further research should also explore the perspectives and challenges faced by small-scale farmers in Malta, including fair compensation, sustainability issues, and the viability of ethical production practices. Additionally, analysing retailers' CSR practices against their stated commitments can uncover gaps in implementation throughout the supply chain. Evidence shows significant discrepancies between

public reporting and the actual execution of those practices, especially regarding labour and sourcing oversight (Jones et al., 2005).

Enhancing socially responsible food systems in Malta requires ongoing collaboration among policymakers, retailers, producers, educationalists and consumers, as collective effort is crucial for developing a sustainable and equitable fresh-produce market. Ultimately, this study provides an important foundation for understanding social-responsibility intentions and the reasons for their frequent lack of practical implementation, while also emphasising the necessary structural reforms to encourage these intentions to translate into consistent, socially responsible purchasing behaviour.

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Appendix A - Results, Analysis & Discussion

Table A.1: Signals consumers consider when purchasing fresh produce

Theme / Code	Frequency
Locally grown / origin labels	18
Fairtrade / organic / ethical certifications	10
Packaging / low plastic	6
Freshness / quality	5
Price	3
Ask seller directly / personal trust	3

Table A.2: Crosstab of respondents' employment status by age group.

		Ages					
		18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-65+	Total
Employment	Employed	73	100	50	50	47	320
	Not working	2	0	3	3	33	41
	Student	26	3	0	0	0	29
Total		100	103	53	53	79	390

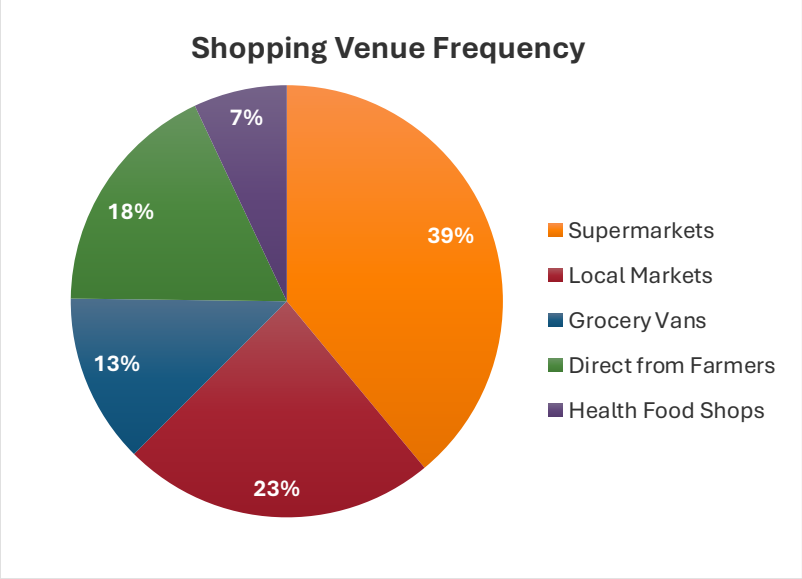

Figure A.1: Pie chart illustrating the shopping venue frequency.

Table A.3: Crosstab of respondents' age group frequency of purchasing from local markets or vendors.

		Local Markets or vendors			
		Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Total
Ages	18-24	44	23	34	101
		30.8%	24.5%	22.2%	25.9%
	25-34	25	42	36	103
		17.5%	44.7%	23.5%	26.4%
	35-44	15	11	27	53
		10.5%	11.7%	17.6%	13.6%
	45-54	27	9	17	53
		18.9%	9.6%	11.1%	13.6%
	55-65+	32	9	39	80
		22.4%	9.6%	25.5%	20.5%
	Total	143	94	153	390
		100%	100%	100%	100%

$X^2(8) = 34.298$, $p = <0.001$

Table A.4: Crosstab of respondents' age group by frequency of purchasing from health food or organic shops.

		Health food or organic shops			
		Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Total
Ages	18-24	90	8	3	101
		26.5%	33.3%	11.1%	25.9%
	25-34	92	7	4	103
		27.1%	29.2%	14.8%	26.4%
	35-44	49	1	3	53
		14.5%	4.2%	11.1%	13.6%
	45-54	41	2	10	53
		12.1%	8.3%	37.0%	13.6%
	55-65+	67	6	7	80
		19.8%	25.0%	25.9%	20.5%
Total		339	24	27	390
		100%	100%	100%	100%

$X^2(8) = 18.918$, $p = 0.015$

Table A.5: Gap persistence across social responsibility dimensions with percentages show those rating factors as 'high importance' only.

		Purchases Reflect Values				
		n	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	χ^2 (p-value)
Social Responsibility Factor (High Importance)	Locally grown	212	52.8%	38.6%	7.5%	$\chi^2 = 30.224$, p<0.001
	Supports farmers	188	54.3%	40.4%	5.3%	$\chi^2 = 37.205$, p<0.001
	Ethical practices	198	52.5%	43.9%	3.5%	$\chi^2 = 36.121$, p<0.001
	Treats staff fairly	166	54.2%	41.0%	4.8%	$\chi^2 = 57.576$, p<0.001

Table A.6: Crosstab of social responsibility support and consideration in fresh produce purchasing.

		Frequency of considering social responsibility when buying produce					
		Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always	Total
I actively try to support socially responsible businesses	Disagree	4	6	84	18	84	196
	Neutral	0	8	6	37	80	131
	Agree	17	0	35	0	11	63
Total		21	14	125	55	175	390

$X^2(2)=8.157$, p=0.017

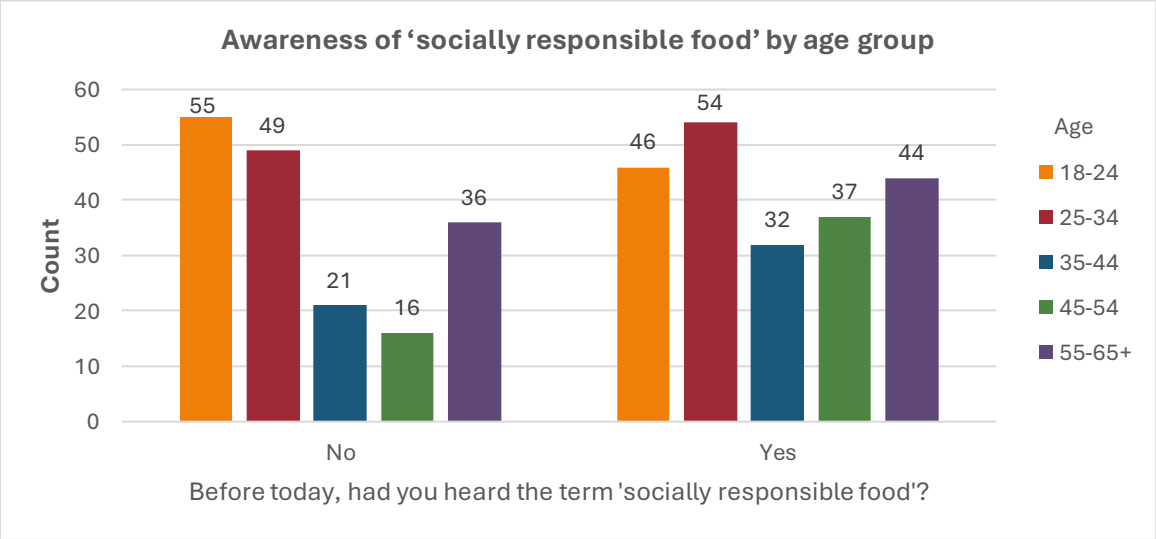

Figure A.2: Clustered bar graph illustrating the frequency of awareness of 'socially responsible food' by age group.

Table A.7: Crosstab of socially responsible consideration and support for socially responsible businesses.

		How often do you consider social responsibility when buying produce?			
		Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Total
I actively try to support socially responsible businesses.	Agree	140	89	5	234
		59.8%	38.0%	2.1%	100%
	Neutral	6	80	45	131
		4.6%	61.1%	34.4%	100%
	Disagree	0	6	19	25
		0.0%	24.0%	76.0%	100%
Total		146	175	69	390
		37.4%	44.9%	17.7%	100%

$X^2(2) = 191.595$, $p = <0.001$

Table A.8: Crosstab of support for socially responsible businesses and frequency of consideration of social responsibility.

		Frequency of considering social responsibility when buying produce					
		Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always	Total
I actively try to support socially responsible businesses	Disagree	4	6	84	18	84	196
	Neutral	0	8	6	37	80	131
	Agree	17	0	35	0	11	63
Total		21	14	125	55	175	390

$X^2(12) = 254.841$, $p = <0.001$

Table A.9: Summary of associations between importance ratings and frequency of considering social responsibility.

Outcome Variable	Factor Assessed	χ^2 (p-value)	Most Chosen	Pattern of Association
How often SR is considered	Locally grown or sourced	$\chi^2(4) = 31.343$, $p < 0.001$	Often	Higher importance = more often
	Fair treatment of staff	$\chi^2(4) = 57.576$, $p < 0.001$	Often	
	Supports local farmers/community	$\chi^2(4) = 75.436$, $p < 0.001$	Often	
	Ethical/sustainable practices	$\chi^2(4) = 67.986$, $p < 0.001$	Often	

Table A.10: Summary of associations between importance ratings and how often purchases reflect socialyl responsible values

Outcome Variable	Factor Assessed	χ^2 (p-value)	Most Chosen	Pattern of Association
Purchases reflect SR values	Locally grown or sourced	$\chi^2(4) = 30.224$, $p < 0.001$	Often	Higher importance = more often
	Supports local farmers/community	$\chi^2(4) = 37.205$, $p < 0.001$	Often	
	Ethical/sustainable practices	$\chi^2(4) = 36.121$, $p < 0.001$	Often	

Table A.11: Summary of associations between social responsibility importance indicators and agreement statements

Agreement Statement	Factor Assessed	χ^2 (p-value)	Most Chosen	Pattern of Association
SR produce supports fair treatment	Fair treatment of staff	$\chi^2(4) = 14.003$, $p = 0.007$	**Agree**	Higher importance = more often
SR produce supports fair treatment	Supports local community	$\chi^2(4) = 10.026$, $p < 0.001$	**Agree**	
Duty to support local farmers	Supports local community	$\chi^2(4) = 51.110$, $p < 0.001$	**Agree**	
Willing to pay more for safe/fair conditions	Supports local community	$\chi^2(4) = 34.204$, $p < 0.001$	**Agree**	
Producers should be treated fairly	Ethical practices	$\chi^2(4) = 20.408$, $p < 0.001$	**Agree**	
SR produce supports fair treatment of workers	Ethical practices	$\chi^2(4) = 17.159$, $p = 0.002$	**Agree**	
Preference for ethical supply chains	Ethical practices	$\chi^2(4) = 13.999$, $p = 0.007$	**Agree**	

Table A.13: Crosstab showing the association between avoiding a shop and caring about social responsibility

		Level of concern for socially responsible practices in fresh produce purchasing				
		Not at all	A little	Somewhat	A lot	Total
Have you ever avoided a shop because of unethical behaviour?	No	12	48	89	24	173
		6.9%	27.7%	51.4%	13.9%	100%
	Yes	3	22	134	58	217
		1.4%	10.1%	61.8%	26.7%	100%
Total		15	70	223	82	390
		3.8%	17.9%	57.2%	21.0%	100%

Appendix B - Questionnaire

Participant Information

Dear Participant,

I am a postgraduate student reading for an M.Sc. in Rural and Environmental Sciences at the Institute of Earth Systems at the University of Malta. This questionnaire forms part of my dissertation, which examines how **social responsibility influences consumer behaviour in Malta's fresh produce sector, with a focus on the gap between ethical intentions and actual purchasing decisions.**

The survey takes approximately **6-8 minutes** to complete. Participation is voluntary; you may withdraw at any time, and all responses are **anonymous**. There are no known risks or personal benefits associated with participating. Data will be processed in accordance with research ethics and data-protection requirements.

To take part, you must be 18 years or older and currently reside in Malta.

If you have any questions, please contact:

Lara Gauci - lara.gauci.20@um.edu.mt
Dr Belinda Gambin - belinda.gambin@um.edu.mt

Consent

1. **Do you consent to take part in this anonymous research study and for your responses to be used for academic purposes?**

    - Yes, I consent
    - No, I do not consent

Section A: Demographics

2. **Age Group**
    - 18-24
    - 25-34
    - 35-44
    - 45-54
    - 55-64
    - 65+

3. **Gender**
    - Woman
    - Man
    - Non-binary
    - Prefer not to say

4. **What is your nationality?**

    Short response

5. **Where do you live?**
    - Malta
    - Gozo

6. **In Malta, which locality do you reside in?**
    - Attard
    - Balzan
    - Birkirkara
    - Birżebbuġa
    - Cospicua (Bormla)
    - Dingli
    - Fgura
    - Floriana
    - Għargħur
    - Għaxaq
    - Gudja
    - Gżira
    - Ħamrun
    - Iklin
    - Kalkara
    - Kirkop
    - Lija
    - Luqa

- Marsa
- Marsaskala
- Marsaxlokk
- Mdina
- Mellieħa
- Mġarr
- Mosta
- Mqabba
- Msida
- Mtarfa
- Naxxar
- Paola
- Pembroke
- Pietà
- Qormi
- Qrendi
- Rabat
- Safi
- San Ġiljan
- San Ġwann
- San Pawl il-Baħar
- Santa Luċija
- Santa Venera
- Senglea (L-Isla)
- Siġġiewi
- Sliema
- Swieqi
- Ta' Xbiex
- Tarxien
- Valletta
- Żabbar
- Żebbuġ (Malta)
- Żejtun
- Żurrieq

7. In Gozo, which locality do you reside in?

- Fontana
- Għajnsielem
- Għarb
- Għasri
- Kerċem
- Munxar
- Nadur
- Qala
- San Lawrenz
- Sannat
- Victoria
- Xagħra
- Xewkija
- Xlendi
- Żebbu

8. Highest level of education completed

- Primary
- Secondary
- Post-secondary
- Undergraduate
- Postgraduate

9. Employment Status

- Employed
- Self-employed
- Unemployed
- Student
- Retired

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10. How often do you buy fresh produce (fruit, vegetables, herbs) in Malta? *

- Daily
- A few times a week
- Once a week
- Once a month
- Never

11. Where do you usually purchase fresh produce?

(Rank from 1=least often to 5=most often)

	1	2	3	4	5
Supermarkets (e.g., Lidl, Greens)	O	O	O	O	O
Local markets or vendors	O	O	O	O	O
Grocery vans	O	O	O	O	O
Direct from farmers	O	O	O	O	O
Health-food or organic shops	O	O	O	O	O

Section C: Your Intentions & Values

12. Importance of the following when choosing where to buy produce

(1=Not important at all, 5=Extremely important)

	1	2	3	4	5
Price	O	O	O	O	O
Freshness and quality	O	O	O	O	O
Locally grown or sourced	O	O	O	O	O
Whether the business treats staff fairly	O	O	O	O	O
Whether the business supports local farmers or the community	O	O	O	O	O
Whether the business uses ethical or sustainable practices	O	O	O	O	O

13. Have you ever avoided a shop or seller because of how they treat people, workers, or the environment?

- Yes
- No

14. If yes, what was the reason? (Select all that apply)

- Unfair treatment of workers
- Poor environmental or farming practices
- Dishonest or misleading business practices
- Did not align with personal values

- Lack of community support
- Other

15. If not, why not? (Select all that apply)

- I have not encountered a situation where it felt necessary
- I don't usually think about these issues when shopping
- Hard to know which sellers are socially responsible
- Price or convenience matters more
- Avoiding a business doesn't make a difference

16. How much do you agree with the following statements:

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
People important to me expect me to buy socially responsible produce.	O	O	O	O	O
I feel confident that I can find socially responsible produce whenever I want.	O	O	O	O	O

Section D: Actual Behaviour & Barriers

Social responsibility is when a business acts fairly, treats people well, and supports the community. This can include paying fair wages, creating a safe and respectful workplace, being honest with customers, and making sure their actions have a positive impact on society.

17. Before today, had you heard the term 'socially responsible food'?

- Yes
- No

18. I actively try to support socially responsible businesses.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

19. How often do you consider social responsibility when buying produce?

- Always
- Often
- Sometimes
- Rarely
- Never

20. If you selected "Rarely" or "Never", what is the main reason?

Long response

21. Overall, how much do you care about social responsibility when buying fresh produce?

- A lot
- Somewhat
- A little
- Not at all

22. When shopping, which indicators do you look for? (Select all that apply)

- Fairtrade certification
- Locally grown in Malta labels
- Wage/safety information
- Cooperative or small-farm origin

- Organic or pesticide-free produce
- I ask the seller directly
- None of the above

23. How much do you agree with the following statements:

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Buying socially responsible produce supports fair treatment of workers.	O	O	O	O	O
I feel it is my duty to support local farmers.	O	O	O	O	O
I want transparent, ethical supply chains.	O	O	O	O	O
I am willing to spend more for fair wages and safe working conditions.	O	O	O	O	O
It is important to me that producers are treated fairly.	O	O	O	O	O

24. How often do your actual purchases reflect your values around fairness, sustainability, or local support?

- Always
- Most of the time
- Sometimes
- Rarely
- Never

25. Have you recently chosen NOT to buy local or ethical produce, even though you wanted to?

- Yes
- No
- Not sure

26. What stops you from buying socially responsible or local produce more often? (Select all that apply)

- Higher cost
- Lack of availability
- Inconvenient opening hours
- Not sure which places are responsible
- I don't prioritise social values
- Other

Section E: Trust & Perception

Social responsibility is when a business acts fairly, treats people well, and supports the community. This can include paying fair wages, creating a safe and respectful workplace, being honest with customers, and making sure their actions have a positive impact on society.

27. To what extent do you trust businesses that claim to be ethical or socially responsible when selling fresh produce?

(1=least trusted and 5=most trusted)

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5

28. How do you decide whether a shop is socially responsible? (Select up to three)

- Labels/origin
- Word of mouth
- Social media/website
- Personal experience (treatment of staff/customers)
- I don't usually judge

29. What would make you more confident that a business is genuinely socially responsible? (Select up to three)

- Third-party certification
- Transparency about sourcing
- Seeing local produce
- Clear communication or stated values
- Recommendations
- Other

30. How much do you agree with the following statements:

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Ethical labels make me more confident in my purchase.	O	O	O	O	O
Displaying local-origin information increases my trust.	O	O	O	O	O

31. In your opinion, what could help more people act on their values when choosing where to buy fresh produce?

(Long response)

Appendix C - Interview Questions

Section A: Understanding Social Responsibility

1. From your point of view, what does “social responsibility” mean when it comes to fresh produce?
2. How do you think this concept is understood by the general public in Malta?
3. In Malta, how much importance is given to local produce as part of being socially responsible?

Section B: Observing Consumer Behaviour

4. Based on your experience, how do Maltese consumers typically behave when buying fresh produce?
5. Is there a gap between what people say they care about and what they actually do?
6. What factors do you think influence their decisions the most? (e.g., price, freshness, labels
7. In your view, how can consumers tell if fresh produce is socially responsible?
   (For example, are there labels, certifications, signs, or other indicators they rely on?)
8. How do Maltese consumers view imported produce vs. locally grown?
9. Do cultural or seasonal traditions (e.g., festas, holidays, Lent, lampuki season) affect buying choices?
10. Are consumers willing to pay more for socially responsible produce? If so, how much more?

Section C: Expert Insights on Intention vs. Action

11. Why do you think some people intend to shop responsibly but do not follow through?
12. Are there any patterns or trends you have noticed, such as age groups or regions behaving differently?
13. What situations or environments make it more likely that consumers will act on their intentions to buy socially responsible produce?

Section D: Role of Institutions and Systems

14. Are you aware of any policies, campaigns, or systems in place that aim to promote socially responsible consumption?

15. How effective do you think these efforts are?

16. What challenges do you see in encouraging more responsible choices at the consumer level?

Section E: Looking Forward

17. What changes, in policy, education, marketing, or elsewhere, could help bridge the gap between intention and behaviour?

18. What role should institutions like yours play in supporting this shift?

19. Is there anything you think I should pay more attention to in this research?

20. Is there anyone that you can refer me to who can provide more insight on this topic?

Appendix D - Information Letter: Interviews

Dear Sir/Madam,

My name is Lara Gauci, and I am a student at the University of Malta, presently reading for a Master of Science in Rural and Environmental Sciences. I am presently conducting a research study for my dissertation titled *'Investigating Social Responsible Fresh-Produce Consumption: A Maltese Case Study'*, supervised by Dr Belinda Gambin and Dr Jonathan Spiteri. This letter is an invitation to participate in this study. Below you will find information about the study and what your involvement would entail, should you decide to participate.

This study aims to examine the gap between consumers' stated intentions and their actual purchasing behaviour for fresh produce, specifically in relation to the social responsibility on the Maltese islands. Your participation will contribute to understanding how socially oriented ESG factors shape real buying decisions IN the local context. All responses will remain confidential and will be used solely for this research.

I understand that I have been invited to participate in an interview in which the researcher will ask questions about how social responsibility influences your intentions and actual behaviour when purchasing fresh produce on the Maltese islands. The interview will take approximately 20-30 minutes, and with your permission, it will be audio-recorded and later transcribed. All recordings will be kept strictly confidential: they will be encrypted and stored on password-protected drives accessible only to the researcher. The original audio files will be permanently deleted as soon as transcription is complete.

If you wish to have your identity associated with the study, please provide your name; otherwise, indicate your preference for anonymity on the consent form. All responses will be kept strictly confidential and stored securely.

You are welcome to accept or refuse participation in this study at any time without having to justify. Additionally, you are free to leave the research at any point without having to give a

reason. If you decide to withdraw, all data will be deleted as soon as it is technically practicable unless doing so would make the research impossible or substantially impair its goals, in which case it would be kept in an anonymised format.

If you choose to participate, please note that there are no direct benefits to you. Your participation does not entail any known or anticipated risks.

Please also note that, as a participant, you have the right under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and national legislation to access, rectify and, where applicable, ask for the data concerning you to be erased.

A copy of this information sheet is being provided for you to keep and for future reference.

Thank you for your time and consideration. Should you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me by email: *lara.gauci.20@um.edu.mt*; you can also contact my supervisor via email: *belinda.gambin@um.edu.mt.*

Sincerely,

Lara Gauci
lara.gauci.20@um.edu.mt

Dr Belinda Gambin
belinda.gambin@um.edu.mt

Appendix E - Consent Form: Interviews

I, the undersigned, give my consent to take part in the study conducted by **LARA GAUCI,** this research is for a thesis that forms part of the Master of Science (Rural and Environmental Sciences), University of Malta. This consent form specifies the terms of my participation in this research study.

1. I have been given written and/or verbal information about the purpose of the study; I have had the opportunity to ask questions, and any questions that I had were answered fully and to my satisfaction.

2. I also understand that I am free to accept to participate or to refuse or stop participation at any time without giving any reason and without any penalty. Should I choose to participate, I may decline to answer any questions asked. In the event that I choose to withdraw from the study, any data collected from me will be erased as long as this is technically possible (for example, before it is anonymised or published), unless the erasure of data would render impossible or seriously impair the achievement of the research objectives, in which case it shall be retained in an anonymised form.

3. I understand that I have been invited to participate in an interview in which the researcher will ask questions to analyse consumer decisions when purchasing fresh produce, with a focus on social responsibility on the Maltese islands. I am aware that the interview will take approximately 20-30 minutes and will be scheduled at a time and place that is mutually convenient.

4. I understand that there are no direct benefits to me from participating in this study. However, I understand that this research has the potential to contribute to the broader understanding and awareness of how social responsibility criteria influence consumer decisions.

5. I understand that, under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and national legislation, I have the right to access, rectify, and, where applicable, ask for the data concerning me to be erased.

6. I understand that all data collected will be erased on completion of the study and, following the publication of results, within two months of completion of the study.

7. I have been provided with a copy of the information letter and understand that I will also be given a copy of this consent form.

8. Please indicate whether you consent to the interview being audio-recorded and transcribed.

    ☐ I agree to this interview being **audio recorded.**

    ☐ I do not agree to this interview being audio recorded.

9. Please indicate whether your name may be disclosed and your responses quoted in research outputs:

    ☐ I agree that my identity may be disclosed in research outputs.

    ☐ I do not agree that my identity may be disclosed in research outputs.

10. Please indicate whether your company's name may be disclosed and your responses quoted in research outputs:

    ☐ I agree that my company's identity may be disclosed in research outputs.

    ☐ I do not agree that my company's identity may be disclosed in research outputs.

11. Please indicate your preference below regarding review of any interview transcript excerpts the researcher may wish to include in publications:

- ☐ I wish to review any excerpts from my interview transcript that the researcher intends to reproduce in research outputs and may request amendments before publication.
- ☐ I do not wish to review any excerpts from my interview transcript before they are published.

☐ I have read and understood the above statements and agree to participate in this study.

Name of participant: _____ Signature: _____

_____ _____

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Dr Belinda Gambin
belinda.gambin@um.edu.mt