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Differences in Household Intentions for Sustainable Food Consumption

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Abstract: *The main purpose of this paper is to present part of the results of a survey carried out on the territory of Bulgaria among the households of three Bulgarian cities. The research was conducted in two waves and covered 2,117 Bulgarian households, with the data collected through a survey. The focus of the presented results falls on examining the relationships between some demographic characteristics such as income, education, dwelling size, place of residence, household size, household life cycle, and intentions to consume sustainably produced food. The results of the study show the existence of relationships that can be analyzed.*

The revealed, albeit weak, regional differences in the intentions of households from the three cities to consume sustainably produced food and food products can be used in the construction of marketing strategies and tools aimed at stimulating the consumption of sustainably produced food products.

1. INTRODUCTION

Stimulating the production and consumption of sustainably produced food is one of the EU's development priorities for two main reasons. The first is related to EU strategies for improving people's quality of life, including their health status, and the second one - with programs for the use of public resources to support sustainably produced foods. In this sense, the role of households as an object and participant in the implementation of strategies is of particular importance. On the one hand, it is related to their inclusion in the achievement of the global goals of sustainable development, and on the other - to the pressure on the economy that they can exert through the demand for sustainably produced food and other products. Several opinions are also advocated, according to which the promotion of sustainable food consumption helps to the achievement of the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals (Nguyen et al., 2021). On the other hand, the thesis advocates that although the popularity and consumption of sustainable food are growing globally, in peripheral areas where production and realization are not so developed, the intentions and attitudes of individuals are not sufficiently well studied and require special attention (Feil et al., 2020). It should also be noted that according to some scientists, the modern food system is not sustainable and the impact of food consumption on the climate crisis is significant (Ammann et al., 2023). This, in turn, shows the importance of researching intentions for sustainable food consumption as part of the processes related to achieving the goals of sustainable development, as well as the social and psychological dimensions that condition it (Lema-Blanco et al., 2023).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The starting point in the research is the definition of sustainable consumption. According to this, we can define it as the consumption of goods and services produced in a sustainable way. This scope includes such goods and services, in the production and realization of which the use

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of natural resources and pollutants is minimized, so as not to harm the consumption of the next generations. But, as we can see, sustainable consumption is a very large topic, so we can focus our interest only on food consumption. On the other hand, scientific interest in sustainable food consumption is very large. Only one search using that combination of keywords (sustainable, food, and consumption) gives us a huge result in scientific publications. If we take one of the bibliometric databases – Medeley.com – we can find more than 16,000 results. More than 10,000 of them are in academic journals. In the last four years, we can find about 1,500 results averages by year. This short example shows that sustainable food consumption is a hot topic in the field of marketing research and, of course, in marketing practices. A bibliometric analysis of publications in the Web of Science from 1975 to 2019 shows that the number of topics included in the consideration of sustainable food consumption is constantly growing within the framework of the two possible perspectives - of the individual and society and this trend has become stronger in the last five years of the analysis carried out (Diaconeasa et al., 2019).

In researching sustainable consumption, there are different possible approaches. One of them, widely advocated in the literature, is related to the search for a theoretical framework to explain the motives and values behind sustainable behavior in general. In this connection, the theory of planned behavior (TPB) can be mentioned (Ajzen, 1991). This theory, developed by Ajzen, and based on his previous research works, tries to explain human behavior as reasoned action (Hill et al., 1977). Concerning these theories, conducted empirical studies show the presence of relationships between sustainable food consumption and social norms, perceived value, perceived consumer effectiveness, and consumer attitudes (Alam et al., 2020). This gives us reason to conclude that sustainable food consumption is a complex process that is determined by external and internal factors. Some of these factors are revealed in the already cited bibliometric analysis, such as involvement, health care, knowledge, and attention focused on sustainable development and the environment, and also such as climate change and environmental impact (Diaconeasa et al., 2019).

Another bibliometric analysis of papers, related to sustainable food consumption covering the period from 1990 to 2023 shows the presence of several sub-themes connected to the consumption of organic products, waste disposal, sustainable development, and consumer behavior (Kristia et al., 2023). In this sense, sustainable food consumption intentions can be seen as a function of personal attitudes towards personal health care and environmental protection - two areas that refer to the already outlined personal and social perspectives of consumer behavior. In support of such a statement, other studies can be cited that link sustainable food consumption to four groups of factors - cultural, social, economic, and related to environmental care (Mensah et al., 2023).

Alam et al. (2020) defined sustainable food consumption intention as something that reflects the future behavior of individuals. Based on the adapted TPB model, they underlined five factors that can determine intentions – Perceived Value, Attitude, Social Norm, Perceived Availability, and Perceived Effectiveness. The results of the conducted empirical study show a strong relationship between intention and sustainable food consumption. In this sense, the study of the intentions of households to consume sustainable food can be seen as a predictor of their future behavior as buyers. The same approach can be seen in other studies. For example, when studying recycling intentions, part of the sustainable behavior of individuals, Pathak et al. (2023) used the TPB model and found a relationship between intentions and two other factors - the place of residence and the existing subjective and moral norms of human behavior (Pathak et al., 2023). In this sense, the specific characteristics of the region, such as the social and ethical norms of the population, cannot be excluded as factors that influence the intentions of sustainable food consumption.

Other studies discuss the relationship between green self-identity, self-congruity, and sustainable food consumption (Gravelines et al., 2022). Based on a study that included 837 respondents from Lithuania, the researchers concluded that sustainable food consumption, in addition to functional benefits such as good taste and health care, is also associated with symbolic benefits such as identification with the ideas of sustainable development and green Lifestyle. Based on a literature review conducted, these factors cannot be excluded from the study of sustainable food consumption intentions. For example, a study focused on the influences on sustainable food consumption behavior of students found links with their healthy lifestyle and outlined the areas that influence consumer choices (Aguirre Sánchez et al., 2021). According to Aguirre Sánchez et al. (2021), these factors can be divided into five main groups – 1) how the food is produced, 2) the impact of food transport on the environment, c) the materials from which the packaging is made, 3) specific food choices (such as limiting meat consumption or using legumes and grains) and 4) food waste. This means that when designing a scale to assess intentions for sustainable food consumption, the variables should be grouped into separate zones that take into account the influence of different groups of factors.

Other studies have highlighted the relationship between rational and emotional aspects that influence the intention to purchase organic food. The attention of the researchers is also directed to the feeling of guilt when buying conventional food by individuals sensitive to environmental protection and at the same time to the financial barriers that reduce purchase intentions (Nguyen et al., 2021). Based on this, it can be argued that the influence of demographic and psychographic variables such as income, attitudes towards environmental protection topics, and feelings of guilt should also be included in the study of intention for sustainable food consumption. A similar relationship is seen in other literature studies that identify sociodemographic characteristics such as gender and level of education as key to choosing sustainable food (Ammann et al., 2023). The influence of knowledge about sustainability and the willingness to pay a higher price for sustainable foods compared to conventional ones should also be noted. At the same time, the influence of values on intentions for sustainable food consumption cannot be ignored. Some of the studies on the subject show the existence of a relationship between values and eating habits and the different degrees of influence of these relationships in the short and long term (Olsen & Tuu, 2021).

As there are different motives, values, and attitudes behind the consumption of sustainable food, the presence of consumer segments should also be taken into account when researching intentions (Verain et al., 2015). Among the factors that influence these intentions can be pointed out the daily routine of the individuals and the habits related to eating out (Pfeiffer et al., 2017). In this sense, the role of social contacts and communication in social networks, a function of these habits, should also be included in the framework of influence research (Schubert et al., 2021). The following clarification should be made here. When we consider eating habits as part of the socio-cultural environment of individuals, in the context of sustainability they must be tied to individual assessments of the state of the environment, the ability to distinguish the expected from the actual state, which in turn act as a trigger, to change eating habits following the individual's desired state (Vermeir et al., 2020). Only then can the intention for sustainable food consumption be linked to motives that condition behavior aimed at achieving sustainability goals.

In other studies, as the main motives behind the intentions for sustainable food consumption, the diet, social values, environmental attitudes, and the desire for individuals to stimulate the development of local economic communities through their behavior are indicated

(Lema-Blanco et al., 2023). Of course, the environment in recent years has been extremely dynamic and the changes reflect on the formation of intentions for sustainable food consumption and the factors that condition them. In this direction, studies of the influences of online shopping habits (Hedin et al., 2019) and related changes after the COVID-19 pandemic (Zanatta et al., 2022) can be indicated.

In connection with the studies and publications reviewed so far, related to the study of intentions for sustainable food consumption, one more clarification should be made. It is related to the supposed gap between positive attitudes toward sustainable foods and the intention to purchase such foods, which differences can be explained by the degree of development of their distribution in specific markets (Vermeir & Verbeke, 2006). In this sense, it should be emphasized that the degree of development of the sustainable food market in different regions can reflect the presence or absence of purchase intention. Based on the literature review, it can be summarized that in scientific studies and publications, intentions for sustainable food consumption are considered as a construct composed of different groups of factors. In examining these intentions, it is common practice to group the factors into different areas related to the impact of values, attitudes, knowledge, and personal and social influences. From this point of view, the design of a scale for researching sustainable food consumption intentions should include variables arising from the indicated different areas of influence. Of course, as already emphasized, the influence of demographic characteristics on these intentions must also be taken into account.

3. RESEARCH METHODS AND RESULTS

The main task of this paper is to present the research results of one aspect of sustainable household consumption. This is the influence of demographic factors on the intentions of households to consume sustainable food. The research thesis is that demographic factors such as the number of persons in the household, number of children under 18 years, education of the household head, household income, size, and type of dwelling can influence intentions to consume sustainably produced foods. Accordingly, two sets of variables are presented here and the relationships between them are tested. The first is related to gathering data on those demographic characteristics that are hypothesized to influence household intentions to consume sustainable food. The second group of variables is designed for the creation of a scale for measuring intention for sustainable food consumption.

The conducted study covers the period 2019 - 2022. Based on a literature review, a theoretical frame of sustainable household consumption is derived. A survey is developed and primary data is collected from 245 households. The first wave of the survey is conducted in February – April 2021, and the second – in October – December 2022. The survey covered a total of 2117 in both waves. The demography of respondents is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Respondent's demographic characteristics

	Frequencies	Percentages
Gender		
Male	875	41.3
Female	1242	58.7
City		
Sofia	779	36.8
Varna	719	34
Svishtov	619	29.2

Level of education		
High school	791	37.4
Bachelor or master	1242	58.8
PhD	81	3.8
Income		
<1500 BGN	306	29.5
1500 – 2000 BGN	301	14.2
>2000 BGN	804	38
No answer	706	18.3

Source: Own research

The survey is representative of the three cities. When designing the sample, quota indicators are used: such as the number of persons in the household, gender of the household head, age of the household head, and number of children in the household under 18 years of age. In addition to demographic variables, three separate blocks are included in the survey based on the prepared conceptual frame. Through them, data is collected on the three groups of factors that determine the sustainable behavior of households - that is, their knowledge, attitudes, and actions. The focus is on the search for differences or absence in the three studied regions.

To describe the intention for sustainable food consumption, a scale with a total of 18 variables is constructed (table 2). These variables cover several sets of intentions aimed at purchases of organic products and products taken directly from local producers, requirements for the composition and packaging of food products, the quantities of food purchased by the household, and food waste.

Table 2. Variables in the scale of household intentions for sustainable food consumption

No.	Variable	What it measures
1.	We strive to buy more organic or natural foods	Intention to purchase sustainably produced food
2.	We buy food produced by local producers or suppliers	Intention to stimulate the local economy
3.	We mainly buy food produced in our country	Intention to stimulate regional sustainable food production
4.	We strive to consume products and food, our own production	Intentions to engage in sustainable food production processes
5.	We eat home-cooked food as a priority	Intentions to reduce the cost and environmental footprint of food preparation and distribution
6.	We prefer to buy food in organic or recyclable packaging	Intention to reduce the environmental footprint of food packaging production
7.	We mainly consume seasonal foods	Intention to reduce the ecological footprint of food transport
8.	We avoid buying semi-finished products	Intentions to consume healthy food
9.	We try not to eat meat every day	Intention to reduce the environmental footprint of industrial meat production
10.	We are trying to consume more fish and seafood that is not industrially harvested	Intention to reduce the environmental footprint of industrial fish production
11.	We include more fruits and vegetables in our diet	Intention for a healthy lifestyle
12.	We strive to consume more grains and legumes	Intention to stimulate agricultural food producers
13.	We check the food we buy for preservatives and colorings	Intention to avoid consuming foods with harmful ingredients
14.	When buying food, we use reusable bags	Intention to avoid the use of single-use bags
15.	We try not to stock up on food at home	Intention to reduce the volume of food purchased
16.	We try to reuse plastic bags	Intention to reuse single-use products
17.	We try to avoid using plastic bags	Intention to be part of the process to reduce the production of plastic bags
18.	We try to compost organic waste	Intention to reduce the use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides
19.	None of the above correspond to our usual behavior concerning food	Lack of intentions for sustainable food consumption

Source: Own research

To investigate whether the 18 questions of the sustainable food consumption intentions scale form a reliable scale, Cronbach's alpha coefficient is measured. The reliability of the scale is 0.815 for the entire sample N = 2117. The correlation coefficients between the individual questions and other questions range between 0.311 and 0.500, which indicates that the individual questions are well correlated with the others and are good components of the scale.

Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) is performed using the principal components method and orthogonal rotation using the Varimax method with Kaiser normalization. The results of the tests of the assumptions for the application of the CFA show that the Kaiser-Meier-Olkin measure of adequacy is greater than 0.60 (0.939>0.6), which means that the number of included variables in each factor is sufficient. Bartlett's test of sphericity is significant because there are values less than 0.05 (0.000<0.05) indicating that the variables are sufficiently highly correlated. Three factors are assigned, with Factor 1 accounting for 37.7%, Factor 2 7.1%, and Factor 3 5.6% of the variables' variance before rotation. The eigenvalues for the three factors are 6.783, 1.281, and 1.003. Ten variables refer to Factor 1, four to Factor 2, and three to Factor 3 (table 3). In Table 3, the variables forming the three factors are given with the numbers with which they are described in Table 2. Within each of the factors, the variables are ordered according to the magnitude of their factor weights in the Rotated Component Matrix. This sequence is also preserved in Table 4.

Table 3. Factors for sustainable food consumption

Factor	Variables	Eigenvalues	% of variance
F1: Specific food choices and diets	2,10,12,3,7,9,13,11,4,6,15	6.783	37.7%
F2: Eating and shopping habits	5,16,14,8	1.281	7.1%
F3: Food disposal and recycling	1,18,17	1.003	5.6%

Source: Own research

The influence of demographic variables such as household size, number of children under 3 years, age of the household head, household income, gender of the household head, etc. on these intentions (table 2) is investigated. The collected data is analyzed using a series of chi-square tests, bivariate distributions, and analysis of variance.

The analysis of the frequency distributions of the respondents' answers shows that a total of eight of the eighteen variables in the scale measuring food habits are the most common. These are habits related to the consumption of local food or food, own production as well as home-cooked food. The second group of habits is related to the use of home-cooked food and avoiding the consumption of semi-finished products. The third group of habits is related to the desire to reduce the use of single-use plastic bags, food waste, and recycling. The analysis conducted looked for significant relationships with a set of demographic variables. These are Place of living, Number of members in the household, Number of workers in the household, Children under the age of 13, Gender of the head of the family, Education of the head of the family, Type of housing, and Income. Table 4 shows the statistically significant relationships between these demographic variables and the variables included in the intention scale for sustainable food consumption at $p<0.05$, N = 2117. The numbering of the variables for the three factors is given according to their numbers in Table 2.

As we can see from the empirical data analysis, demographic characteristics, albeit weakly, have an impact on sustainable food consumption intentions. The values of the Phi and Kramer's

V correlation coefficients range between 0.149 and 0.289. This indicates the presence of weak relationships but gives us reason to investigate them. Several relations can be commented on from the results in Table 3. There are significant relationships between three of the demographic characteristics and variables in the intention for sustainable food consumption scale - these are Place of living, Children under the age of 3 years, and Income. It can be outlined that among the surveyed respondents, these demographic characteristics have the strongest influence on the intentions for sustainable food consumption. It is between these three demographic characteristics and the intentions for sustainable food consumption that the correlation coefficients have the largest values. At the same time, weak relationships are found between three other demographic characteristics and respondents' intentions - these are the Number of members in the household, Gender of the head of the family, and Type of housing.

Table 4. Statistically significant relationships between tested variables

Demography	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3
Place of living	2,10,12,3,7,9,13,11,4,6,15	5,16,14,8	1,18
Number of members in the household	7,13,4	5,16,14,8	none
Number of workers in the household	2,10,12,7,9,13,11,4	5,14,8	1,17
Gender of the head of the family	10,3,9	none	17
Education of the head of the family	2,10,3,7,13,11,4,6,15	16,14	1,18,17
Children under the age of 3	2,10,12,3,7,9,13,11,4,6,15	5,16,14,8	1,18,17
Type of housing	2,3,4,15	5,16,8	18
Income	2,10,12,3,7,9,13,11,4,6,15	5,16,14,8	1,18,17

Source: Own research

A series of chi-square tests conducted show other interesting results. For example, statistically significant relationships are found between place of residence and some of the household habits related to the use of sustainable food. Such are, for example, those related to the use of organic foods. The fact that other demographic factors, such as the gender of the head of the household or the size of the dwelling, do not influence the intentions of using organic products is indicative. At the same time, significant relationships are found between the respondents' answers and the survey waves. On the other hand, significant relationships are also found between food habits and the type of housing. As well as whether the household owns its housing. At the same time, the presence of significant relationships between the gender of the head of the household and the use of sustainable foods can be commented on.

It should be noted, that such relationships are not significant for all the variables tested, but only for some of them. For example, the gender of the head of the household does not influence the use of seasonal fruits and vegetables, unlike the intention to use food produced by the household itself. The relationships between demographic variables and intentions to use sustainable food are also tested by one-way analysis of variance, which confirms the conclusions drawn.

Based on the collected data and the analysis conducted, several important conclusions can be drawn. First of all, the differences found between the first and second waves of the survey show that the observed processes are dynamic. Second, the presence of relationships between the type of settlement and intentions to consume sustainable food indicates the presence of regional

differences. Third, the significant relationships between these intentions and demographic variables such as housing type, home ownership, and income indicate that sustainable food consumption can be conditioned by the material status of the household.

4. FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

The role of intentions for sustainable food consumption is important in terms of understanding the motivations that determine the sustainable behavior of households in general. If the demographic characteristics of individuals have a weak influence on the intentions determining their sustainable behavior, then the task of further research is to find out which other factors have a stronger influence. Based on the research done, such factors may be related to respondents' attitudes and values formed during parenting and caring for young children. The same can be assumed about income if it is considered not as an indicator of social status, but as a resource that ensures the development of personal interests and a set of opportunities. Last but not least, the role of the place of residence in forming the intentions for sustainable food consumption and in general for sustainable behavior should be investigated.

Also of particular importance is the finding that intentions for sustainable food consumption change over time. The dynamics of these processes show that through the formation of correct and aimed at changing the intentions, values, and attitudes of individuals, this process can be managed. Here it is important to highlight the growing role of cities as institutions that provide not only stimulating policies to the population but also infrastructure to promote sustainable behavior.

The results of the research connected to the influence of demographic characteristics can serve in the formation of regional policies aimed at stimulating sustainable food consumption, as well as in the segmentation of consumers. This is of extreme importance both for the institutions that implement such policies and for the businesses related to the production and sale of sustainable foods.

5. CONCLUSION

The supply and production of sustainable food in Bulgaria are still less developed compared to most EU member states. The fact that the incomes of the population lag behind those in the EU is also not without importance. This means that the barriers to buying sustainable food are relatively higher for Bulgarian consumers. From this point of view, the promotion of sustainable food consumption, which, as shown in this study, is determined to a stronger degree by income, place of residence, and parentage, needs to be directed in a different direction. In this sense, it can be argued that policies aimed at stimulating sustainable food consumption and sustainable behavior of households in general in the EU should be adapted to the specific features of different markets. Some of these adaptation opportunities can be discovered by examining the factors that influence and determine households' intentions for sustainable behavior.

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