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Albanian and UK Consumers' Perceptions of Farmers' Markets and Supermarkets as Outlets for Organic Food: An Exploratory Study

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Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to elicit UK and Albanian consumers' perceptions of food outlets in order to understand their views on supermarkets and farmers' markets as outlets for organic food. A qualitative research methodology was chosen as the best way to get an in-depth understanding of how consumers of these two different countries understand and evaluate buying organic food from two different food outlets. This exploratory research is a first step to find out how and why organic food is being bought in supermarkets and farmers' markets. The results show that respondents associated organic with vegetables and fruit, that taste good, are healthy, and are free of pesticides and hormones. The importance of motives varies between the outlets they prefer for buying organic food. An interesting finding is the fact that Albanian respondents refer to the farmers' markets as the villagers' market.

Keywords: organic food; farmers' markets; supermarkets; consumer perception

1. Introduction

There has been a recent increase in consumers' interest in local, healthy and environmentally friendly food which has brought about a renewed interest in farmers' markets [1]. Farmers' markets have become a synonym for food quality considering that local produce is often picked when ripe and fresh [2].

Over the past decade, there has been a rise in the interest that UK consumers show in purchasing food from farmers' markets [3]. This is partly due to positive associations with both the products

available and the shopping process at farmers' markets [4,5]. However, it may also be due in part to the negative connotations that some green consumers have of more mainstream food outlets, particularly supermarkets [6] (p. 620). In Albania, on the other hand, consumers who have been traditionally reliant on farmers' markets for a wide range of local foodstuffs are embracing supermarkets for the first time. The rise of supermarkets in this post-communist (Post-communist country is a country in transition from a communist regime. Communist is the regime where the private property and a profit-based economy are replaced with public ownership and communal control of at least the major means of production (e.g., mines, mills, and factories) and the natural resources of a society (Encyclopaedia Britannica).) European country has been dramatic [7].

In the UK, the farmers' market is often portrayed as a greener alternative for purchasing food and the rise of the farmers' market is understood to denote the rise of a greener consumer interested in food that is more likely to be local, organic and seasonal. From this perspective, the rise of supermarkets in Albania could be understood to represent a move away from green consumption. However, given the dearth of research into consumer behavior in Albania, it is impossible to tell how this changing food retail landscape is being understood by individual consumers. The study described in this paper tackles these issues for the first time by conducting a qualitative pilot study which asks both UK and Albanian consumers to talk about their food shopping in detail in order to explore consumers' perceptions and better understand these two opposite retail trends and understand how this affects the purchasing of organic food.

There are two reasons why the UK and Albania were chosen for this study. The first reason is that opposing trends can be seen to be at work within the retail sectors in these two contexts. Consumers in the UK have had access to organic food and supermarkets for many decades. However, farmers' markets are emerging as a new food outlet in the country. British consumers' perceptions of organic food and supermarkets are documented in many academic studies [8–20]. Farmers' markets have recently gained popularity among consumers and researchers [21–26]. A report conducted by the Soil Association [27] in the UK showed that respondents purchase organic food mainly from supermarkets and farmers' markets. Sales of organic products through farmers' markets and farm shops increased by 3.5% to £42.7 million in 2013 [27] whereas sales of organic products through supermarkets increased by 1.2% to £1275.6 million. It seems that UK consumers' interest in organic food is increasing and that the growth rate of organic food bought from farmers' markets is higher than for supermarkets. In contrast, in Albania organic food and supermarkets are new concepts among Albanian consumers whereas farmers' markets have been the main food outlets in the country for the last 50 years to provide fruit and vegetables.

The second reason is that UK and Albania are very different in terms of their economies, and the extent to which they have been researched. Albania is an economy emerging from the old communist regime. Thus, cultural inheritances persist alongside institutional and market changes. Moving from a state controlled economy, interest from private investors and private organizations has risen in the country which also involves the emergence of supermarkets and modern terms such as organic food. In terms of consumer behavior research, little is known about the Albanian consumer. The UK, on the other hand, provides a free market context for the retail sector that has been subject to decades of scrutiny from consumer behavior researchers. These differences make these two contexts interesting for asking questions about consumer perceptions of organic food and the outlets that it is purchased

from. Therefore, the purpose of this pilot study is to find out whether there are similarities in the perception of organic food provided in supermarkets and farmers' markets by respondents in a developing, post-communist country as opposed to a Western European country.

The paper will begin by outlining the current debates within the literature on supermarkets and then farmers' markets. Following this, the methods used for data collection will be outlined. Data from both countries is then presented and discussed in the light of the extant literature in order to demonstrate how supermarkets and farmers' markets are currently understood by the respondents in each country as outlets for organic food and make recommendations for how researchers can take forward this under-researched area.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Supermarkets

Supermarkets emerged as a particular retail form in the United States of America (USA) during the 1930s and gradually spread to countries outside the USA, adopting local and global characteristics [28]. The trend characterizing the development of these new retail forms was similar in the United States and the United Kingdom: supermarket stores started as places offering dry food and then full-line fresh foods [29]. Fresh produce was not available in supermarkets until the 1960s due to the belief that it was impossible to move consumers from the wet markets and fruit shops to these new big retail stores [29].

To begin with, the supermarket development began with locations in urban areas in Western countries, and then in the 1990s, an out-of-town initiative was accompanied by the decision to increase the size of the stores as well as building supermarkets at the edge-of-town centers. Latterly, supermarkets began to locate abroad because of the limited opportunities for market growth in the US and Europe [30]. For this reason, supermarket chains began searching for new market opportunities overseas [30].

Supermarkets are the dominant format of food and grocery retailing in Western societies [31]. For example, in the UK there are four major British supermarket chains—Tesco, Asda, Sainsbury's and Morrisons—which together account for a total of 75.4% of all UK food shopping [32].

According to Reardon *et al.* [33] following the success in Western countries, the “supermarket revolution” took place in three waves in developing countries (A developing country is one in which the majority lives on far less money—with far fewer basic public services—than the population in highly industrialized countries (World Bank).): the “first-wave” started in the mid-1990s in South American and East Asian countries, “the second-wave” encompassed Mexico, much of South-East Asia, Central America, and Southern-Central Europe, and in the “third-wave”, which occurred in the late 1990s early 2000s, Eastern/Southern Africa, India and China experienced the “supermarket revolution” [34].

The above findings show that there is a contrast in the supermarket development growth between developed and developing countries. Developed countries have experienced a gradual growth in the number of supermarkets while in developing countries, the supermarket entry and expansion has happened in only a matter of years. In Albania, for example, Euromax was the first supermarket chain that entered the country in 2005 [35]. Other supermarket chains include the Greek chain Marinopoulos

with Carrefour introducing the first hypermarket in 2011, which is the largest shopping center in the country [35]. This fact supports Hawke's [30] statement about supermarkets' fast growth in developing countries where traditional outlets, hypermarkets, and discounters coexist at the same time.

Supermarkets have been emerging not only in developing countries but also in post-communist countries in Europe such as in Russia, Croatia, Latvia, Slovakia Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic. Most of these countries were state controlled economies and the state played an important role in the retail sector [36,37]. Research in post-communist countries is focused on the expansion strategies of large Western supermarket chains that are entering these countries as opposed to analyzing consumers' perceptions [36,37]. There is some evidence of studies investigating consumers' perceptions towards supermarkets exist in Lithuania [38] and another one revealing that young Czechs, Hungarians, and Poles like shopping at supermarkets and are more open to Western shopping ways [39]. As stated earlier, Albania is another post-communist country that is experiencing the supermarket phenomenon. Four international supermarket brands are now operating in the country sharing 20% of the market share with the remaining 80% being spent on local markets and smaller shops [7]. Supermarket stores in Albania are perceived to be trusted sources of food products [40].

Supermarket development came as a response to the changes in the habits, demands and preferences of consumers in developing countries [30]. Urbanization, the entry of women into the workforce outside of the home, and the higher per capita incomes are all contributory factors to this expansion [41]. According to Traill [42], supermarkets in developing countries are no longer places frequented only by rich people. This is partly because of the rising incomes and the desire to imitate Western lifestyles [42]. Moreover, supermarkets in developing countries are perceived as places for entertainment, where families spend their day shopping together [43]. According to Harvey [19], another reason behind the fast supermarket development is the internal niche market they create by bringing together high with low income consumers with distinctive marques at high prices, along with their own-label discount ranges. However, despite the fact that supermarkets are widely accessible to lower-income consumers, their use is not similar to higher-income consumers [44].

Academic literature presents a plethora of studies around supermarkets discussing a variety of matters such as their entry into various countries, the threat they pose to the local small shops [45,46], prices [47–49], nutrition issues of the products available in supermarkets [50–52], customer relationship marketing (CRM), strategies and maintaining customer relationships [53,54], and customer service and loyalty [55–59]. In Western countries, the supermarket literature is becoming more specialized, abandoning slowly the concept of a pure consumer perception of supermarkets. These new studies are covering topics such as “recording brain waves at the supermarket: what can we learn from a shopper's brain” [60], “the influence of background music on consumer behaviour [61], “aroma stimuli influencing shopper's behaviour and satisfaction” [62] and obesity issues related to the food bought in supermarkets [63,64]. However, this exploratory study aims to refocus on the traditional consumer perception research. The findings of this study will have managerial implications for farmers' markets and supermarkets on how to develop strategies to promote organic food to consumers in two different countries where two dissimilar trends of consumption are developing.

2.2. Farmers' Markets

In the past, farmers' markets used to be held in outdoor settings in which small farmers gathered to sell directly to the public, usually from the backs of pick-up trucks or on makeshift tables [65] (p. 15). Nowadays, farmers' markets are not necessarily held only outdoors. The farmers' market in Cheltenham, for example, is held in a venue dedicated to local farmers and local producers in the heart of the town's shopping center [66]. It seems that the farmers' market structure has changed over the years. Back in the 80s, farmers would sell their products in the streets while nowadays farmers' markets take place in organized venues/spaces.

According to the National Farmers' Retail & Markets' Association [67], the first UK farmers' market started in Bath in September 1997 and since then the term "farmers' market" has stood for locally produced food sold by the people who made it. FARMA accredits certificates to farmers when they comply with the following criteria:

- The food is produced locally
- The stall is attended by the producer or someone involved in production
- All the goods on sale will have been grown, reared or processed by the stallholders.

Farmers' markets have long existed as the prime outlet for such small-scale producers with the appeal of providing "local" produce to urban residents [68]. However, there is a consensus as to their common characteristics:

- (1) "involving direct selling to the consumer by the person who grew, reared, or produced the foods,
- (2) "in a common facility where the above activity is practiced by numerous farmers,
- (3) "who sell local produce" [69] (p. 399).

Typically, the goods sold at a farmers' market would include: fruit and vegetables, meats and meat products, cheeses and other dairy products, fish, honey, bakery products, jams, pickles, dressings and sauces [68]. Farmers' markets are also believed to offer a more diverse range of products compared to supermarkets [70].

The increasing preference for locally produced food has resulted in 30% sales growth in the UK over the last four years [3]. There is also growth in the number of farmers' markets which stands at over 550, representing some 9500 market days and 230,000 stallholders throughout the UK [71]. The growth of farmers' markets in the UK is often linked to consumers' desire to move away from food that was produced using industrialized techniques [72]. They have been associated with a growing interest in rural heritage, culinary traditions and tourism [4]. Farmers' markets have also been identified as part of a larger food system movement that establishes consumers' cultural and personal identity [5]. Increased consumption of fresh fruit and vegetable products of better nutritional content, good taste, and flavour has also contributed to the success of farmers' markets over the years [73].

It has been argued that farmers' markets serve to [68]:

- enable increased profit margins, by shortening the supply chain
- provide a secure and regular outlet for produce
- provide fresh local produce, direct from the producer
- generate new business and boost trade for adjacent shops

- encourage consumers to support local business and local agriculture
- ensure that money stays in the locality
- reduce transport, food miles and packaging and
- encourage people to interact.

Further benefits are associated with farmers' markets such as attracting people into the areas in which they take place and they also contribute to local economic development through the support of local traders [70]. La Trobe [22] argues that farmers' markets may increase local economic sustainability and they do not have a negative impact on the environment in terms of transportation and food miles [68,70]. Farmers' markets may also act as a regeneration initiative for the local economy [22,70,74]. Gerbasi's study [74] showed that farmers themselves believe that the farmers' markets not only increase their household income (from a consumers' perspective, the most common reason for buying from a farmers' market is to support the local farmers) but also stimulate the local economy, add cultural value and improve social networks between farmers and their customers.

Tong *et al.* [1] examine farmers' markets from a different angle. They suggest that farmers' markets differ from other food stores because they quite often have very limited hours of service and are distributed very sparsely in space. This means that farmers' markets are not easily accessible by people whose schedule does not fit with the markets' service hours.

Studies in most European countries such as Sweden [75,76], Norway [77–79], the Netherlands, and Germany [80,81] indicate that the development of alternative food networks such as the farmers' markets is often based on “modern” and more “commercial” quality definitions, stressing environmental sustainability or animal welfare, and on innovative (and retailer-led) forms of marketing [82]. According to Evans *et al.* [83], the general move towards “ecological modernization” may reconcile agriculture and environment in ways which continue to support agricultural production.

However, the development of farmers' markets in countries such as Italy, Spain, and France mostly builds on activities of regional quality production and direct selling with long-lasting traditions [12]. Other countries such as Portugal and Greece originate more than 75% of European registered, regionally designated products. This happens due to cultural and structural factors that reinforce links among region, tradition, origin and quality in countries in the south of Europe [84]. These countries include small, diversified, and labour-intensive family farms employing traditional methods of producing food, the prevalence of the convention of “domestic worth”, with the market and industrial conventions embedded in robust localistic and civic orders of evaluation [85] (p. 186).

Literature around farmers' markets in Eastern or post-communist Europe is very scarce: Rizov and Mathijs [86] have analyzed farm survival related to the scale of farms in Hungary; Blaas [87] focuses on farm holders and their households in Slovakia. However, in the Czech Republic, the consumers' perceptions of farmers' markets have been investigated [88]. In contrast to the US/Western findings of farmers' market consumer perception [89,90], the survey in Prague showed that consumers of different ages, family sizes and occupation type shop from farmers' markets. These consumers are mainly motivated by the freshness of food and better taste. Many Western scholars aimed to reveal the characteristics of farmers' markets consumers. They concluded that the typical customers are predominantly educated, urban, middle-class, middle aged and well-off [91–94]. In Prague, a variety of consumer types would visit the markets such as urban middle class shoppers, mothers with children,

and pensioners, claiming that farmers' markets provide an interesting alternative and a welcomed uniqueness to the shopping experience across the socioeconomic and demographic divide of shoppers to the anonymous, large-scale supermarkets [88]. This study showed another interesting outcome: Czech consumers seemed to care less about environmental or ethical issues, support for local farmers or community building functions than their fellow shoppers in Western European countries and the USA [3,94,95]. The main motivation of Czech consumers is rather hedonistic; it is about the freshness, taste and enjoyment of the experience [88].

2.3. *Buying Organic Food*

"It is not an easy task to provide precise and universally agreed definition of organic agriculture and organic food" [96] (p. 358). "Organic food products" is a term that began to be used in the 1940s. It refers to food raised, grown and stored and/or processed without the use of synthetically produced chemicals or fertilizers, herbicides, pesticides, fungicides, growth hormones and regulators or generic modification [96]. According to the European Commission's regulation [97]: "Organic production is an overall system of farm management and food production that combines the best environmental practices, a high level of biodiversity, the preservation of natural resources, the application of high animal welfare standards and a production method in line with the preference of certain consumers for products produced using natural substances and processes". Organic foods are defined as products that contain no fertilizers, no chemicals, no pesticides, no antibiotics, no hormones, no genetically modified organisms (GMOs); and are not processed, not over packaged, no injection/no harm for animals, natural, tasty, nutritious, colorful, fresh/stays fresh longer, and are labor intensive [98–100].

Defining organic food is with no doubt significant, however, it is also important to distinguish between certified and non-certified organic food. To begin with, in UK there are 11 official certification bodies: Organic Farmers & Growers Ltd., Organic Food Federation, Soil Association Certification Ltd., Biodynamic Association Irish Organic, Farmers and Growers Association (IOFGA), Organic Trust Limited Quality Welsh, Food Certification Ltd. Ascisco Ltd., Global Trust Certification Ltd. and Scottish Food Quality Certification Ltd. (Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, UK, 2012). In Albania, there are three official certification bodies that certificate and appropriately label organic products: BioAdria (founded in 2006), Institute of Organic Agriculture (founded in 2010) and Albinspekt (founded in 2006) [101]. A key distinction between certified and non-certified organic production is the inspections–labeling process [102] Inspections mobilize contractually independent inspectors, and then forward inspection information to labelers who determine whether the product meets standards to be certified as organic [102].

"Organic" has many different meanings and interpretations and is often associated, and sometimes confused, with terms such as "green", "ecological", "environmental", "natural" and "sustainable" [10,103,104]. It is interesting to note that consumers have different meanings for the term "organic" and what is organic to one may not be organic to another [105]. Moreover, producers and regulators of organic food may also interpret the meaning of organic differently from consumers [105].

On the other hand, in the UK consumers consider that farmers provide them with organic, locally produced, fresh, tasty and quality food and there is often an implicit assumption that farmers' market food is organic, which is not always the case [106]. Moreover, the empirical findings of

Vanhonacker *et al.* [107] suggested that consumers perceive organic food to be the same as locally produced food. Motives of British consumers in buying organic food include fair trade, social aspects, and support of local farmers and environmental protection [6,108] as well as ethical and moral issues [109]. Health and food safety are factors that motivate consumers to buy organic products as well as high standards of animal welfare [14]. The factors that may affect consumers' decisions to buy organic food are knowledge, social, cultural and personal factors [15]. "Consumers perceive organic food as a means of achieving individual and social values of which the most important is centered around the health factor for themselves and their families" [110] (p. 351).

As mentioned above, "organic" may be interpreted differently by consumers' interpretations that may vary from country to country. Their primary motivations for buying organic food has been found to be related to health issues, particularly the fear of ingesting pesticide residues and chemical inputs [111–117]. In Albania for example, despite the fact that very little research has been undertaken to investigate Albanians' perceptions of organic food, a study showed [118] that Albanians believe that organic food comes directly from farmers' markets. However, their findings also showed that Albanians prefer to buy organic food from supermarkets which offers a contradiction to respondents' beliefs that "organic" food comes directly from farmers.

Consumers of organic products also justify their choice by the quality and taste of these foods and by their alignment with an agricultural model that matches their values: animal welfare, support for local producers, small-scale production, and trust in organic producers, who are not perceived as profit-driven [117]. Large companies such as supermarkets that produce and market organically certified foods are therefore somewhat distrusted by consumers [119].

"Organic" is used as a heuristic for naturalness and "greenness" [120] (p. 98). However, a study indicates that the majority of the respondents were unsure of the sources of the ideas they had about organic food and this process may be described as accidental learning [121]. People seem to build up knowledge of the meaning of the term over time via "osmosis" and terms like organic have different meanings to different individuals or groups especially when the international dimensions are concerned [120] (p. 99).

Seyfang's [122] (p. 198) findings showed that consumers expressed a wide range of economic, social, environmental and personal reasons for purchasing local organic food from a farmers' market, and many were quite deliberately avoiding supermarkets where possible, choosing to support the alternative food network instead. On the other hand, a study conducted in Malaysia showed that organic products were mainly bought by organic food buyers from conventional markets followed by natural and whole food supermarkets [123]. Chinnici *et al.* [124] found that there are four segments of organic consumers: "pioneers" who purchase at the supermarket out of curiosity; "nostalgic" are the ones that associate organic produce with the past; "health conscious" consumers who regularly purchase organic produce due to health concerns and who prefer specialized retailers such as farmers' markets and expect to pay a premium; and "pragmatist" consumers who are knowledgeable, but price-sensitive. In the UK, a study [10] showed that all respondents wanted organic food to be available in supermarkets because they are convenient places to shop.

Weatherell *et al.* [16] also found that despite consumers' willingness to engage with local food producers in order to buy organic food, supermarkets remain their first point of reference when buying organic food. Supermarkets providing organic food have an advantage compared to other distribution

channels because they are easily accessed and consumers believe that they sell a large variety of organic food which is fresh, tasty with good appearance [18]. However, Young [125] argues that there are criticisms of supermarkets overselling organic food for large profit and supplying organic food from overseas markets—adding to food miles—despite the fact that UK-produced supplies are available. Major supermarket retailers use food labels to indicate the quality and the level of sustainability of the products they provide according to their perceptions of what consumers need or prefer [126].

In summary then, this paper seeks to understand how supermarkets and farmers' markets are understood by consumers in the UK and Albania as potential sources of organic food. In the next section, the methods used for the pilot study that was undertaken are outlined.

3. Methods

This is a preliminary, pilot study that employs an exploratory, qualitative research approach. Explanatory research is suitable for complex and profound examinations of issues and makes recommendations for the future [127]. Exploratory research on the other hand is better suited to identifying the real nature of research problems or formulating relevant hypotheses for later tests [128]. Taking into consideration the above, an exploratory research approach has been adopted because very little is known about Albania and its consumers and Albania as a research topic is underdeveloped in the literature [127]. Moreover, as this is a preliminary, pilot study employing exploratory research, it is more suitable in order to make recommendations for future empirical investigations [127]. This sort of exploratory, qualitative approach has been used to great effect by researchers looking at issues such as belief formation [129], consumer perceptions [130], and decision making processes [100].

According to Strauss and Corbin [131], qualitative research provides an in-depth, rich understanding of the topic under research as well as an understanding of the participant as an individual which is not possible to gain through quantitative methods. Qualitative research is a useful and appropriate tool for investigating perceptions, beliefs, motivations and attitudes [132].

This study is attempting to understand the perceptions of consumers drawn from different cultural backgrounds. A qualitative research methodology is the best way to get an insight on how consumers of two different countries understand their world and life [133].

In-depth open-ended interviews were used to gather the data. As Chisnall [128] (p. 219) proposed: "Basically, in-depth interviews are non-directive interviews in which the respondent is encouraged to talk about the subject rather than to answer 'yes' or 'no' to specific question". This means that the interviewer has the ability to adjust the questions according to the responses that are given by the respondents and open a two-way communication.

Data Collection

Data in Albania were collected in the urban area of Tirana which is the country's capital city. This area was chosen because purchasing power is concentrated mainly in Albania's capital, and is subsequently a reasonably good representative area of the country due in large part to internal migration. During the last 20 years, Tirana has grown from 200,000 to around 700,000 inhabitants. As

people from all parts of Albania have migrated to Tirana, it represents the whole variety of subcultures within the country [134].

Data in the UK were collected in Edinburgh and Glasgow, the two largest cities in Scotland, UK so as to have a direct assessment with the capital of Albania and because, as with Tirana, these major cities contain diverse populations.

Six interviews were conducted in total, with three in Albania and three in the UK, at farmers' markets and outside supermarkets so as to get immediate data from the consumers' shopping experience.

A topic guide was prepared for the interviews that consisted of four parts (see Appendix): Part 1 included questions about respondents' general food shopping experience; part 2 about food outlet perception; part 3 about shopping decisions; and part 4 included questions about their demographic variables.

The purpose of this outlay of questions was to get a general feeling of respondents' shopping routines, evaluate their perceptions of shopping outlets and the reasons they frequent each one.

Respondents were not asked about their perceptions of organic food directly either in Albania or in the UK. The reason was the fact that previous studies suggest that one of the reasons consumers buy food in farmers' markets is that they provide organic produce [6,22,104]. A general question was asked instead regarding the reason respondents visit a farmers' market in order to find out whether they would give organic food as a reason in their responses without being prompted.

An additional reason that Albanian respondents were not asked any questions about organic food directly was to discover their level of familiarity with organic food.

When respondents did not mention organic food in their responses, then a more specific question was addressed around organic food perception. On the other hand, when respondents mentioned organic food spontaneously then more specific, follow up questions were addressed in order to gain insights into their perception of organic food.

4. Results and Discussion

The following section contains the results of the Albanian and British respondents that reveal some first insights into the respondents' perceptions of organic food, highlighting the reasons behind their purchases, and the outlet of their preference. Tables 1 and 2 below show the demographic characteristics of the UK and Albanian respondents:

Table 1. Respondents' demographic information in Albania.

Age Range	Gender	Education	Occupation	Household Income Range	No of Children
40–49	Female	High School	Housewife	More than 30,000 Lek	2
70+	Female	Primary	Pensioner	More than 15,000 Lek	0
21–29	Female	BSc	Musician	More than 30,000 Lek	0

Table 2. Respondents' demographic information in the UK.

Age Range	Gender	Education	Occupation	Household Income Range	No of Children
30–39	Male	PhD	Engineer	More than 30,000 Lek	2
40–49	Female	MSc	IP Manager Part-time	More than 15,000 Lek	0
40–49	Female	BSc	Accountant Part-time	More than 30,000 Lek	0

4.1. Perception of Organic Food

All respondents were positive about knowing what organic food is. When asked to elaborate more on the meaning of the term, different answers were given by the Albanian respondents as opposed to the British ones. To begin with, the term “bio” was more recognisable among Albanian interviewees than organic. This might be due to the labelling efforts of official certification bodies (BioAdria, Institute of Organic Agriculture, Albinspekt) [101] that promote organic food in Albania. They all supported the notion of organic food, which was mainly associated with fruit and vegetables being fresh and tasty. However, Albanian respondents relate organic food with local food without “hormones” produced by local villagers who have used “local seeds” to grow their products and “organic fertilizer-cattle waste”.

British responses are similar to what previous studies have already suggested that [105–111] consumers buy organic food because it is healthy, tasty, has no pesticides, and that they wish to support their local community. Surprisingly, environmental concerns were not mentioned. However, one of the British respondents seemed to be more aware of the matter and gave a more insightful answer:

“It is not using pesticides excessively. I know there are some that use pesticides. It’s more using natural fertilizers, not chemicals to stop bugs, they are using field rotation, and they are using techniques to minimize wastage that don’t involve just being crops sprayed with chemicals”.

4.2. Food Outlet Choice Supermarkets vs. Farmers’ Markets

4.2.1. Farmers’ Markets

Albania

One first point that it is worth mentioning is that Albanian respondents refer to the farmers’ markets as the villagers’ market. This finding is in contrast to another Albanian study [112] referring to these types of markets as farmers’ markets. It is important to mention this new term within the findings of this study, because it shows that these markets are perceived differently by Albanian consumers. This is a social stereotype, a remnant of the communist regime where the fruit and vegetables were produced by villagers who would then sell their products in large cities. This is still the case in Albania 25 years after the change of regime.

Generally, Albanian respondents were positively predisposed towards farmers’ markets. One of the reason they frequent these markets is the taste and the quality of the products. Albanians believe that villagers provide them with the freshest, best produce they have as: “*they collect as much in the morning as they expect to be sold during the day*”. Another reason is that villagers take care of their

product, provide healthy, local products that stay fresh without the use of preservatives. Throughout the interviews, it was made clear that Albanians trust the villagers about the quality and origin of the food they provide. This is similar to what Marsden *et al.* [12] found that consumers wish to engage in a relationship with farmers and food producers that will be based on trust and reciprocity. It is also remarkable that two out of three interviewees (the older ones) mentioned that the food they purchase from the villagers market reminds them of the taste of food they had when they were younger: *“I choose the taste of my time”*. This is also similar to what Chinnici [124] found in Italy where he identified the “nostalgic” type of organic consumer. Availability and convenience were among the other reasons that Albanian respondents shop from farmers’ markets. These markets take place every weekday, in many streets throughout the major cities of Albania. The relationship built between the producer and the end customer was also mentioned several times: *“You build like a spiritual relationship with the villager, we know them for many years and they cannot lie about the quality of their products because if I stop shopping from him he will face difficulties”* or *“The villagers treat you well”*.

Albanian respondents buy organic food from farmers’ markets because they offer fresh, quality products, without hormones and pesticides. They trust the farmers and are willing to pay premium prices despite their low income. This finding is consistent with findings of Western studies identifying consumers with high incomes, willing to pay premium prices for fresh, quality products, without hormones and pesticides in farmers’ markets [14,117–121].

Albanian and UK respondents were also asked to provide a definition of a typical farmers’ market consumer. Research indicates that farmers’ markets provide organic food, thus their typical consumer may be similar to the organic food consumer. The reason why this question was addressed was in order to identify whether the respondents’ descriptions would be similar to what studies have indicated about the organic food consumer in Western contexts.

When Albanian respondents were asked to describe a typical consumer of the farmers’ markets, they were unable to give a definition: *“The largest population shop from the villagers’ market”* as they believe that everyone shops from them. They also believe that farmers’ market will not be affected by the entrance of supermarkets in the country: *“The villagers’ market existed, exists and will exist in the future because it is important they continue existing for the people that sell the products and their customers”*.

Considering that the literature around the farmers’ markets in the Western countries is almost exclusively positive, Albanian respondents were also asked to name any negative aspects of these markets in Albania. Hygiene and cleanliness were two of the most important issues that came up: *“They sell on the street, dust is one negative, they also provide milk in plastic bottles. The products are not displayed in carts like in supermarkets but they put them on fig leaves to give you a taste of the village”*.

UK

Two out of three respondents from the UK sample mentioned the frequency, convenience and the prices of the products provided in the farmers’ markets as negatives and reasons for not shopping there: *“It tends to be quite expensive and it doesn’t happen quite often”*. The general feeling was that the best deal wins over the quality and organic standards: *“Ideally if I could get cheap fresh products directly from the farms that could attract me to go there”*. This is consistent to similar findings that

Seyfang [122] found when consumers of the Eostre farmers' market in Norfolk were asked to express their opinion about the negative aspects of the farmers' markets.

The UK respondents were of a well educated and affluent background, however the best deal was more important than buying organic food generally or buying organic food from farmers' markets: *"It is always going to be the price for me, it is the major factor"* or *"Often at farmers' markets there is an amount for a bunch of carrots but I don't know physically how much pound of carrots it is. I don't like going to shop from farmers market because I am so focused on ensuring that I get the best deal"*. One of the respondents had used a farm shop before where she bought a chicken on her first trip. When she went back to shop again, she mentioned that the size of the chicken became smaller but the price remained the same: *"But the chickens got smaller and the price stayed the same and I thought hang on, I am tripping out here to do this and I don't think it tasted better. When the size changed I thought I am not travelling here for double the price for something less in the size. So I switched back to Aldi's"*. This indicates that there is no trust between the farmer and the consumer as seen in the Albanian sample. This finding is also inconsistent with what previous studies have found, where farmers providing organic food are seen as trusted food sources [105]. The farmer in Albania would not try and deceive his/her customers because of the fear of losing them. The third UK respondent was a more concerned consumer and more aware of organic farming and farmers' markets. Her reasons for frequenting the farmers' markets are similar to those of Albanians respondents: *"you know where the food has come from. The meat is from a farm that is between Kilmarnock and Ayre. So you know you have seen the cows in the field and you know they have been quite happy wondering about and eat nice grass. And that is what you get in the packet and is the same for the pig farm which is fairly local, there is also a poultry farm and you again get to see the hens coming out, it is not a battery farmed hen, you know the source of your food, you know what food you are getting"*. A sign of mistrust was also pointed out about the farmers taking place in large cities within UK. It was mentioned that they do not provide locally sourced or organically grown food: *"I used to live up in Glasgow and go to a farmers market in Queen's Park and there were times there were some fruits and vegetables sold there that made you think there is no way these have been grown by you. You went to the fruit and vegetable market this morning and bought these things. So I think the farmers' market works better when there is a local knowledge"*.

Farmers' markets that take place in big cities were considered to be a negative aspect of these markets, they were considered to be a *"big rip-off"*. The reason is the fact that in a big city there is no direct understanding of who the farmers are. Concerns were also expressed that farmers selling in farmers' markets in big cities, buy their products from elsewhere, mark them up significantly and then sell them in their markets. So, once more, trust issues arise again between the consumer and the farmer.

When respondents were asked to describe the typical farmers' market consumer, they all agreed that the consumer is a middle age, middle class person whose children have left the home: *"I think it is people who are really keen on knowing their food sources, that really matters to them the food chain or very affluent people who like the concept of buying at farmers' markets. I think there is a bit of snobbery about it but I think there is a fair amount of people who care about their food"*.

In contrast to the Albanian findings, the UK data indicated that farmers' market will be affected by supermarkets who have started advertising about buying as much local *"as Scottish as they can"*, *"in some ways I can delude myself that Aldi's care more about Scotland. If people perceive that*

supermarkets are buying more locally they could mitigate the use for farmers' markets. On the other hand, when supermarkets are getting bad press the farmers' markets do better you'd imagine. But farmers' markets are small, the one in Linlithgow got small the last time I saw it".

4.2.2. Supermarkets

Albania

The interviews with the Albanian consumers showed that there are two different types of supermarkets operating in the country. The local ones, which are small supermarkets existing in neighborhoods, that consumers visit frequently during weekdays. The large ones are built outside the city center and are used for larger scale shopping and as places of entertainment: *"I visit the large ones once in two weeks or once a month. We also go there for entertainment purposes. We make an excursion for the kids, have fun and drink a coffee while passing your time"*. This finding is similar to a previous study suggesting that supermarkets in developing countries are perceived as places of entertainment [43]. Supermarkets are viewed positively in terms of offering a variety of products in one place. They are used for shopping for dairy or other products such as detergents and shampoos. All Albanian respondents agreed that they don't shop for fruit and vegetables there because they don't offer "bio" products and: *"You can tell just by looking the vegetables available in supermarkets that are full of hormones. For example tomatoes or cucumbers they may look beautiful outside but when you eat them they are full of nerves. They also taste differently. It's like an old saying "it feels like you are eating hay"*. They believe that supermarket products are full of pesticides but they are well-presented and organized within the stores. They offer lower prices when they make offers in some supermarket stores. However, it was concluded that all respondents buy in supermarkets all the products that the villagers cannot produce. An interesting controversy that was identified between the responses was that two mentioned they trust supermarkets because they control better the product they offer on their shelves while the third one said that there might be a manipulation around the expiration date on the labels of the products: *"The sausages for example that are imported products you cannot trust that because it was not consumed at the place where it was produced was sent for consumption in Albania"*.

When interviewees were asked to describe the supermarket consumer it was much easier than the farmers' market consumer. The general conclusion according to their comments is that a typical supermarket consumer: *"is someone of a good economic background, well dressed, who shops after work. I can see them in the afternoon shopping in supermarkets and the appearance (clothing) indicates good economic background"*.

UK

In contrast to the Albanian interviewees, it was easier for the UK respondents to speak about supermarkets. They shop mostly in supermarkets, including for fruit and vegetables. These respondents would not go out of their way to buy or search for organic food in supermarkets. Prices, once again, were found to be a more important factor thus finding the best deal was the goal when shopping in a supermarket outlet.

When asked to define the supermarket consumer, they struggled to do so as they believe everyone shops from supermarkets. They are convenient food outlets where you can buy anything you need and

are opened for a long time during the day. However, they are considered to be unethical because of their “*general attitude, they don’t care what they are damaging, it is producing things as cheaply as they can get it*”.

5. Conclusions

The findings from the interviews conducted between Albanian and UK respondents showed that these two different types of consumers perceive the meaning of organic food slightly differently. This might be due to the fact that the term organic has been present in the UK for quite a long time now and consumers are fairly educated by digital and offline media of what it means/represents. Whereas in Albania, the term has only been used very recently and consumers describe organic according to their personal experiences and understandings of how a “natural” product should be.

The responses also showed a different understanding of farmers’ markets and supermarkets as food outlets. Supermarkets in Albania are perceived to be places of shopping and entertainment for the whole family. The typical consumer is an affluent, educated, working individual. The opinions though are divided about whether they should be trusted food outlets or not. The villagers’ market as they call the farmers’ markets turned out to be better trusted outlets that provide better quality fruit and vegetables and bio products. For these reasons, Albanian consumers are willing to pay the premium prices of the farmers’ markets.

Paradoxically, price seemed to be an important factor for the UK respondents in deciding whether to shop at the farmers’ markets. These markets seem to operate differently in these two countries. In the UK, it looks like it is a habit of luxury to visit a farmers’ market as they require time, money, transport and prior research as per where they occur and attract a specific type of consumer. Whereas, in Albania they are spread throughout the large cities, occur every day of the week and attract all type of consumers who do not sacrifice food quality over price.

Supermarkets on the other hand are also perceived differently. In the UK, consumers visit them because they offer good deals, are convenient places to shop and are open for longer hours. Supermarkets are not frequented though as places where they can buy organic food. In Albania, on the contrary, supermarkets are seen as places where they can spend a Sunday with their family, have a coffee and do their shopping. However, Albanians, like the UK consumers interviewed, also do not trust supermarkets as providers of organic/good quality fruit and vegetables.

One of the contributions of this study is to add an Albanian strand to the literature as very little is known about the country and its consumers. An examination of previous studies conducted in other contexts showed that both organic food and farmers’ markets consumers are middle class individuals, well-educated with good household incomes. However, the results of this study challenge this. The Albanian interviewees were of different educational and income backgrounds with one having finished just primary school to another one having university education. All of the three interviewees were shopping from farmers’ markets and willing to buy the products despite the higher prices. On the contrary, the UK respondents were all well-educated, one had a PhD, and apart from one, they would not go out of their way to visit a farmers’ market or spend more to buy good quality food. The fact that this pilot study has offered different results to some of the previous studies underlines the need for a wider study in order to explore these findings further.

The paradox seen in the literature about supermarkets and farmers' markets in Albania and the UK is that there is a reverse trend of the growth and popularity of these two outlets for organic food in these countries. As stated in the literature, farmers' markets started developing in the UK in the mid-late 1990s whereas in Albania this was the traditional way of buying fresh food. On the other hand, supermarkets started developing in Albania in the mid-2000s whereas in the UK supermarkets have been present for many decades.

Another interesting finding from the Albanian data is the perception that the respondents had about organic food. In the literature, it is found that ideas about organic food for consumers from Western countries are not only related to food without pesticides, health and taste but also to animal welfare and environmental sustainability. In Albania, the notion of organic food is related to food that farmers have produced in a traditional way, the way they used to cultivate food in Albania during communism using natural fertilizers and agricultural techniques. This perception is probably related to the fact that many people that were alive in Albania during that time are still alive and are transferring these opinions/perceptions down to their children. Thus, this paper is not only casting light on Albania and its consumers but also recording some consumer perceptions before the country becomes part of a more Westernized Europe.

6. Further Research

This exploratory study has found that the study of supermarkets and farmers' markets as outlets of organic foods in these two differing contexts is certainly worth pursuing. Due to the limitation of the sample size of this study, further research needs to be undertaken in order to cast some more insights into the existing findings. A larger sample size can help examine whether, for example, there is a cultural factor that drives the results found in this study. The results thus far suggest that a further study would benefit from the insights that could be gained by the use of Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) [135] as a theoretical framework to underpin any further investigation.

It is also worth investigating how consumers' perceptions changes in Albania in the forthcoming years with Albania's candidacy to enter the EU.

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Authors Contributions

The author gathered, transcribed, translated and interpreted the data herself. All work presented in this paper is her own derived from personal research. The Albanian data were gathered in the Albanian language and translated back to English for the purpose of the data analysis.

Appendix: Albanian and UK Consumers' Perceptions of Farmers' Markets and Supermarkets as Outlets for Organic Food: An Exploratory Study

Pilot Interview Protocol

Interview Number:

Part 1: Food shopping experience

1. Tell me about your most recent food shopping trip.
2. Was there any time pressure on your shopping duration?
3. Was this trip planned or spur of the moment?
4. When did you go?
5. When do you usually prefer/enjoy going for food shopping?
6. Who did you go with?
7. How much did you spend in your last food shopping trip?
8. What transport did you use for your food shopping?
9. How much time did you spend on food shopping?
10. Was this a normal trip for you?

Part 2: Food outlet perception

Farmers' market

1. (if they don't mention FM in part 1): Do you ever shop at a farmers' market?
(if no): Is there any particular reason for that?
(if yes): Can you tell me about the last time you bought food in a farmers' market?
2. Do you go alone to a farmers' market?
3. What do you usually buy when visiting a farmers' market?
4. Why would you shop from a farmers' market?
5. How frequently do you shop from farmers' markets?
6. What types of food do you buy from farmers' markets?
7. What are the negative aspects of shopping from a farmers' market?
8. What are the positive aspects of shopping from a farmers' market?
9. Is buying seasonal food important to you? Do you think farmers' markets provide seasonal food?
(either yes or no): What kind of people shop from a farmers' market? Could you possibly describe a typical farmers' market customer?
10. How do you think farmers' markets will be affected by the new supermarkets?

Supermarkets

1. (if they don't mention SM in part 1): Do you ever shop at a supermarket?
(if no): Is there any particular reason for that?
(if yes): Can you tell me about the last time you bought food in a supermarket?
2. Who do you go with when shopping in a supermarket?
3. What do you usually buy when visiting a supermarket?

4. Why would you shop in a supermarket?
5. How frequently do you shop in supermarkets?
6. What types of food do you buy in supermarkets?
7. What are the negative aspects of shopping in a supermarket?
8. What are the positive aspects of shopping in a supermarket?
(either): What kind of people shop from a supermarket? Could you possibly describe a typical supermarket customer?

(for those who use both):

Do you spend more in supermarkets or in farmers' markets?

Part 3: Shopping decision

1. How do you decide where to go shopping?
2. Who in your household influences this decision?
3. What are the most important differences for you between farmers' markets and supermarkets?
4. Are there any constraints on your choice of the food outlet (money, distance, location, parking)?
5. What are your top priorities for making a decision on which food outlet to shop from (prices, brands, packaging, convenience of outlet, environment)?
6. Which would be your favourite food outlet if there weren't any constraints on your shopping process, why?

Part 4: General info

Gender:

Female	<input type="checkbox"/>
Male	<input type="checkbox"/>

Age Range:

less than 20	<input type="checkbox"/>
21–29	<input type="checkbox"/>
30–39	<input type="checkbox"/>
40–49	<input type="checkbox"/>
50–59	<input type="checkbox"/>
60–69	<input type="checkbox"/>
70+	<input type="checkbox"/>

Number of Adults in Household:

Number of Children in Household:

Education:

Occupation:

Household Income range:

up to £ 15,000–20,000	<input type="checkbox"/>
£ 21,000–30,000	<input type="checkbox"/>
£ 31,000–40,000	<input type="checkbox"/>
£ 41,000–50,000	<input type="checkbox"/>
£ 51,000–60,000	<input type="checkbox"/>
£ 61,000–70,000	<input type="checkbox"/>
more than 70,000	<input type="checkbox"/>

Conflicts of Interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

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