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Non-Negotiable Trust, Emotional Localism: A Qualitative Hierarchy of Cues for Organic Food in an Emerging EU Market

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Abstract

Organic foods, functioning as credence goods in sustainable consumption, compel consumers to rely on extrinsic cues for quality evaluation. To address this challenge, this study employs a qualitative, phenomenological approach, conducting ten in-depth, semi-structured interviews with Romanian organic food consumers. The resulting data were systematically analyzed through thematic analysis to uncover decision-making patterns. The findings reveal a sequential hierarchy in which credible transnational certification (the EU organic logo) serves as a non-negotiable gatekeeper of trust, followed by country of origin—particularly local—which functions as an emotional and heuristic differentiator signaling authenticity and freshness, while price acts as a pragmatic arbiter, mediating trade-offs between ideal preferences and budget constraints. Based on these findings, this study proposes the Trust–Emotion–Pragmatism model as a nuanced framework for understanding organic food choice, suggesting that local producers can enhance competitiveness by first establishing trust through certification, then leveraging the emotional appeal of local origin, and finally adopting effective pricing strategies.

Keywords: organic food; consumer behavior; consumer trust; food certification; country of origin effect; qualitative research; emerging markets

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1. Introduction

The rapid expansion of the global organic food market, fueled by a growing consumer consciousness towards health and sustainability [1–4], faces a fundamental challenge: organic products are "credence goods," meaning that their essential attributes, such as pesticide-free cultivation or ethical farming practices, cannot be directly verified by consumers even after purchase or consumption [4–6]. This unverifiability creates an information asymmetry that compels consumers to rely on extrinsic cues, that is, observable indicators such as certification, country of origin, or price, to infer quality and authenticity [5–7]. These cues are often processed through a hierarchy of cues, a sequential prioritization in which certain signals dominate decision-making and frame the interpretation of subsequent ones [5,7].

To mitigate perceived risk, consumers typically anchor their choices in a triad of on-label signals: official certification, which functions as a guarantee of trust [3,6,8]; country of origin (COO), a complex indicator that evokes both perceived quality and affective associations, often manifested through a preference for local products [7,9]; and price, which operates simultaneously as a constraint and a quality signal [3,4]. While a considerable body of quantitative research has assessed the relative importance of these cues—most

often through conjoint analysis [3,4,6]—such approaches primarily answer the question of what consumers choose, but not why and how.

This gap is particularly relevant in emerging European markets such as Romania, where consumer behavior is shaped by a dynamic interplay of rising environmental awareness, historical institutional distrust, strong localist sentiments, and high price sensitivity [9–13]. Similar dynamics are observable across Central and Eastern Europe, underlining the need for a more nuanced understanding of consumer decision-making in these contexts [9,10].

Therefore, the present study moves beyond a purely quantitative assessment by adopting a qualitative, phenomenological approach [14,15] to deconstruct the organic food decision-making process. Through in-depth interviews with Romanian consumers, we uncover the sequential hierarchy in which certification, origin, and price cues are evaluated and negotiated. The ultimate objective is to propose a process-based model of consumer choice that provides actionable insights for agricultural producers, marketers, and policymakers seeking to strengthen local agri-food systems and promote sustainable consumption more effectively.

A more comprehensive discussion of the theoretical underpinnings and integration with the existing literature is provided in Section 4.1, Theoretical Integration and Contribution to Existing Literature.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Research Design and Philosophical Approach

To bridge the research gap identified in the introduction, this study is framed within a qualitative, interpretivist paradigm [14,15]. We specifically employ a phenomenological approach. This allows us to understand the lived experiences (Erlebnis) and subjective realities of consumers as they navigate the complexities of the organic agro-food market [9,10]. This stance assumes that reality is socially constructed. Therefore, it requires an in-depth exploration of personal meanings and cognitive processes [11]. The core of our research design consists of in-depth, semi-structured interviews. These were selected for their ability to capture personal narratives, tacit beliefs, cognitive shortcuts, and the underlying logic guiding consumer choices [14–16].

2.2. Participant Sampling and Recruitment

The first respondent for the snowball chain was identified through direct contact by the lead researcher (A.-M.N.) within her professional network, based on meeting the initial inclusion criteria [17]. This participant then recommended other potential participants from their social circle who also met the study criteria, initiating the snowball effect [18].

The selection of Romanian consumers for this study was deliberate, driven by several key characteristics of this emerging EU market that create a unique context for understanding organic food consumption. As highlighted in the introduction, Romania presents a dynamic interplay of rising environmental awareness, a legacy of institutional distrust [7], strong localist sentiments [9], and notable price sensitivity. Understanding consumer behavior in such a nuanced environment is crucial for both theoretical advancement and practical policy implications within Central and Eastern Europe [8].

We planned to recruit 10 participants, interviewed within a defined timeframe, focusing on urban Bucharest consumers, as urban centers typically represent early adopters and primary consumers of organic products in emerging markets [1,9,12]. Participants were selected for diverse professional backgrounds (e.g., Marketing Manager, Engineer, Teacher, IT Consultant, Public Servant, Architect, Entrepreneur, Nurse, Graphic Designer, Lawyer) to capture a broad spectrum of cognitive styles, values, and decision-making heuristics [2–4,6,7]. This ensured a sample of engaged and articulate consumers who, by

virtue of their regular purchase habits, likely possess a certain level of disposable income and prioritize organic consumption within their household budgets.

All interviews lasted approximately 65 min, were fully transcribed, and were thematically analyzed [19]. Participant identities were protected through pseudonyms (P1–P10), and no sensitive personal data were collected. Participants were informed about the study purpose, procedures, the right to withdraw at any time, and measures for protecting confidentiality [14,15].

Theoretical saturation was monitored throughout data collection [18,19]. Saturation was considered achieved when no new themes or insights emerged in the last two interviews, ensuring that the sample size was sufficient to capture the range of consumer perspectives on organic food decision-making.

The detailed sociodemographic characteristics of the participants are presented in Table 1. Participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time. Their identities remained anonymous, and confidentiality was fully protected using pseudonyms.

Table 1. Sociodemographic characteristics of the participants (*N* = 10). Source: Own study, based on semi-structured interviews with participants (*N* = 10). Detailed anonymized summaries are provided in Supplementary File S2.

Participant Code	Pseudonym	Gender	Age Range	Professional Background	Consumer Archetype	Model Stage
P1	Maria	Female	30–35	Marketing Manager	The Risk-Averse Mother	Trust Filter
P2	Mihai	Male	40–45	Engineer	The Rational Optimizer	Pragmatic Arbitration
P3	Andreea	Female	30–35	Teacher	The Authentic Seeker	Emotional/Heuristic Evaluation
P4	Paul	Male	25–30	IT Consultant	The Pragmatic Utilitarian	Pragmatic Arbitration
P5	Cristina	Female	35–40	Public Servant	The Budget-Conscious Patriot	Pragmatic Arbitration
P6	David	Male	45–50	Architect	The Hedonistic Gastronome	Emotional/Heuristic Evaluation
P7	Adrian	Male	30–35	Entrepreneur	The Globalist Performer	Emotional/Heuristic Evaluation
P8	Ioana	Female	50–55	Nurse	The Health-Conscious Preventer	Trust Filter
P9	Cătălin	Male	25–30	Graphic Designer	The Aesthetic-Driven Consumer	Emotional/Heuristic Evaluation
P10	Elena	Female	35–40	Lawyer	The Transparency-Driven Analyst	Trust Filter

Legend: Trust Filter—archetypes primarily driven by trust and risk mitigation. Emotional/Heuristic Evaluation—archetypes guided by emotions, heuristics, and personal values. Pragmatic Arbitration—archetypes making trade-offs based on rational/practical considerations.

2.3. Data Collection Protocol

Data were collected over a three-week period in May 2025.

All interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview guide and methodological protocol (Supplementary Material File S1, Table 2), designed to explore in depth the cognitive and affective processes underlying consumer decisions regarding organic products, with a focus on the interaction of the three extrinsic cues: certification, COO, and price.

Table 2. Summary of the interview guide. Source: Own elaboration based on Supplementary Material File S1: Semi-Structured Interview Guide and Methodological Protocol.

Phase	Objective	Main Themes/Questions	Duration: Approximately
Phase I: Introduction & Informed Consent	Establish trust, ensure ethical compliance	- Introduction & context - Confidentiality and consent - Right to withdraw	5 min
Phase II: Contextualization & "Grand Tour"	Understand participant context and shopping habits	- Describe typical grocery shopping routines - Preferred store types and reasons - Meaning of "healthy eating" - First contact with organic products; triggers	10 min
Phase III: In-Depth Exploration—Decision Deconstruction	Explore perception and hierarchy of cues	Sub-theme A: Certification—Trust, risk perception, comparative scenarios Sub-theme B: COO—Importance of COO, local vs. imported preferences, cognitive and affective associations Sub-theme C: Price—Price management, trade-offs, price-quality signaling	45 min
Phase IV: Closing & Summary	Allow additional input and conclude positively	- Open-ended final question/ member-checking - Thank participant and reassess confidentiality	5 min

The interviews were conducted online via a secure video conferencing platform (Zoom Video Communications, San Jose, CA, USA, Version 5.17.11) to ensure participant confidentiality. All interviews were audio-recorded, fully transcribed, and thematically analyzed. This approach allowed for capturing the decision-making hierarchy and mental processes of consumers, ensuring a deep understanding of how certification, COO, and price cues are evaluated and negotiated.

The guide was designed to be flexible but ensured coverage of three core thematic areas: the role of certification in building trust and mitigating risk, the cognitive and affective dimensions of country-of-origin, the function of price as a barrier and/or a quality signal.

To facilitate a grounded discussion, participants were shown visual stimuli of three distinct organic honey products, which varied on the key attributes, prompting a concrete discussion of their trade-off calculus.

2.4. Data Analysis

To enhance the trustworthiness and rigor of the analysis, we did not use multiple coders but employed a peer debriefing process, where a colleague not involved in the study critically reviewed the coding framework and the emergent thematic structure. Any discrepancies or uncertainties in coding were discussed and resolved through consensus between the lead researcher and the peer reviewer, ensuring that the final themes faithfully represented the data.

Table 3 illustrates the development of the superordinate themes, sub-themes, and codes, providing an audit trail of how decisions were made during the thematic analysis.

Table 3. Development of Superordinate Themes, Sub-Themes, and Codes (Audit Trail). Source: Authors owns elaboration based on thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews.

Superordinate Theme	Sub-Theme	Initial Codes/Analytic Memos	Data Extract (Quote)	Coding Validation Notes
Certification as the "Non-Negotiable Gatekeeper of Trust"	Necessity of Certification	Trust delegated to transnational authority; Logos as mandatory filter	"The EU logo is the only one I trust 100%. [. . .] It's an international passport of safety." (P1, Maria)	Peer debriefing confirmed interpretation; consensus reached on trust delegation.
	Process-Based Trust	Trust in standardized processes; Legitimacy of certification	"It is fundamental. The EU logo is the most credible because it has a legislative and control system behind it that I recognize as robust." (P2, Mihai)	Coding agreed with peer reviewer; focus on process validation.
	Emotional Neutrality	Certification as technical condition, minimal emotional influence	"The logo is like a high school diploma. [. . .] Necessary but not sufficient; it doesn't stir any emotion." (P3, Andreea)	Consensus reached on technical/emotional distinction.
	Hierarchy of Certifications	Premium certifications increase trust beyond baseline EU logo	"The EU logo is a basic standard, a minimum. German certifications increase trust exponentially." (P7, Adrian)	Peer feedback supported hierarchy coding; distinguishes baseline vs. premium certification.
	Legal/Institutional Trust	Certification formalizes obligations and accountability	"The EU logo is a 'trust contract' [. . .] It's a formal framework that creates obligations." (P10, Elena)	Coding validated; legalistic perspective emphasized by peer reviewer.
Country-of-Origin as the "Emotional and Heuristic Differentiator"	Normative/Local Preference	Emotional choice; Supporting local economy	"I would choose Romania. I feel I'm supporting the local economy. It feels fresher." (P1, Maria)	Peer debriefing confirmed emotional/normative coding.
	Practical Localism	Local choice based on freshness or logistics, not patriotism	"Assuming identical certifications, I choose the product with the shortest supply chain, so Romanian." (P2, Mihai)	Consensus reached; practical reasoning distinguished from emotional preference.
	Deviant Case/ Country-Image	Country-image stereotypes override localism	"Germany, rigor and flawless processes; Romania sounds like improvisation." (P7, Adrian)	Peer discussion agreed on deviant-case coding; stereotype-driven origin evaluation.

Table 3. *Cont.*

Superordinate Theme	Sub-Theme	Initial Codes/Analytic Memos	Data Extract (Quote)	Coding Validation Notes
	Storytelling/Branding	Origin used as narrative or visual marketing cue	"'Made in Romania' can be a very powerful story if communicated correctly visually." (P9, Cătălin)	Peer review validated marketing/visual framing interpretation.
	Conditional Localism	Origin secondary to process and transparency	"I would choose the product that inspires more confidence in its production process, not in its origin." (P8, Ioana & P10, Elena)	Coding confirmed; origin secondary to verified production quality.
Price as the "Pragmatic Arbiter of the Final Choice"	Price as Risk Signal	Low price triggers doubts; high price suggests quality	"A very low price screams 'danger!' It makes me doubt everything." (P1, Maria)	Consensus coding after discussion; low-price risk heuristic.
	Price-Quality Heuristic	Price reflects production integrity	"A low price makes me question the integrity of the production system for that product." (P2, Mihai)	Peer review confirmed coding; price interpreted as quality/process cue.
	Emotional/Social Cost	Price forces compromises with emotional impact	"I wanted local eggs, 25 RON; Dutch ones 14 RON. . . I felt guilty taking the cheaper ones." (P3, Andreea)	Coding agreed; peer reviewer confirmed emotional compromise interpretation.
	Economic Rationality	Optimization within acceptable quality category	"I always look for the best quality-to-price ratio. [. . .] Usually the cheapest product in an acceptable quality category." (P4, Paul)	Consensus coding; price treated pragmatically after minimal quality ensured.
	Experiential/ Investment Perspective	Price as payment for premium experience or story	"I am willing to pay for exceptional quality and a beautiful story." (P6, David)	Peer review validated interpretation; price reframed as experiential investment.
	Evidence-Based Evaluation	Price judged in context of transparency, information, and certification	"A high price must be justified by the entire 'dossier of evidence'; low price makes me doubt seriousness." (P10, Elena)	Coding confirmed; price evaluated alongside full evidence dossier.

3. Results

The analysis of the interview data revealed a consistent, yet deeply nuanced, hierarchical framework that consumers use to deconstruct the complex signals of organic products.

Our analysis yielded three superordinate themes that encapsulate this sequential process. These themes are not merely a list of important factors but rather represent distinct stages in the consumer's decision-making journey. A summary of this thematic framework is provided in Table 4.

Table 4. Thematic Analysis Framework—Summary with Participant Contribution. Source: Authors' own elaboration based on thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews.

Superordinate Theme	Description	Illustrative Quote	Number of Participants Supporting Theme
1. Certification as the Non-Negotiable Gatekeeper of Trust	Certification acts as a primary, binary filter. Its absence leads to immediate rejection, serving as a cognitive shortcut to manage risk.	"The EU logo is the only one I trust 100%. . . it's an international passport of safety." (P1, Maria)	9/10
2. Country-of-Origin as the Emotional and Heuristic Differentiator	Once trust is established, "local" preference emerges, driven by emotional and heuristic considerations (freshness, authenticity, community).	"My heart would choose Romania. . . I feel it is my responsibility to support our own farmers." (P5, Cristina)	7/10
3. Price as the Pragmatic Arbiter of the Final Choice	Price acts as the final decision-maker, often creating trade-offs between ideals and budget, producing cognitive dissonance.	"I wanted the ones from a local farm I adore, but they were 25 RON. . . I took the Dutch ones and felt guilty." (P3, Andreea)	8/10

3.1. Theme 1: Certification as the Non-Negotiable "Gatekeeper of Trust"

Across all participants, certification—specifically the EU organic logo—functioned as a primary, non-negotiable filter. It was consistently described not just as an important attribute, but also as a prerequisite for a product to even be considered for purchase. This cue operates on a binary pass/fail basis, acting as a cognitive shortcut to manage the high perceived risk of a credence good.

As Maria (P1), the 'Risk-Averse Mother,' stated, "It's a brutal but necessary filter. . . If it's not there, I don't waste another second on that product." This sentiment was echoed from a more analytical perspective by Mihai (P2), the 'Rational Optimizer,' who described the logo as "a guarantee of a process, not a promise" (translated from Romanian). Even participants driven by emotion, like Andreea (P3), the 'Authentic Seeker,' acknowledged its foundational role, calling it "the foundation of a house. . . without it, everything collapses" (translated from Romanian). The data strongly suggest that in a market with a legacy of institutional distrust, consumers delegate their cognitive trust to a standardized, transnational authority.

3.2. Theme 2: Country-of-Origin as the "Emotional and Heuristic Differentiator"

Once the "trust gate" was passed, the decision-making process shifted from a rational risk assessment to a more affective and heuristic evaluation. In this second stage, COO emerged as the dominant differentiator, with a powerful preference for "local" (Romanian) products. This preference was fueled by a cluster of interconnected beliefs and emotions:

- A Heuristic for Freshness and Purity: Participants consistently associated a shorter supply chain with a fresher, more "alive" product. As Ioana (P8), the 'Health-Conscious Preventer,' noted, "a product from Romania has traveled less. . . I feel it is closer to its natural state" (translated from Romanian).
- A Narrative of Authenticity and Connection: Local products were perceived as having a "soul" and a human story, contrasting with the "cold" and "industrial" feel of

imports. David (P6), the 'Hedonistic Gastronome,' captured this by saying, "Local honey. . . has a 'terroir'. I'm buying a piece of that story" (translated from Romanian).

- A Normative Motivation for Community Support: A sense of civic duty and economic patriotism was a strong driver. "I feel it is my responsibility to support our own farmers," explained Cristina (P5), the 'Budget-Conscious Patriot' (translated from Romanian).

However, the study also identified a critical deviant case. Adrian (P7), the 'Globalist Performer,' inverted this preference, stating: "I will always choose a product from Germany. . . I associate Germany with rigor, flawless processes, superior technology. To me, 'local' sounds like improvisation" (translated from Romanian). This highlights that a "globalist" consumer mindset, driven by strong country-image stereotypes, can override the localism effect.

3.3. Theme 3: Price as the "Pragmatic Arbiter" of the Final Choice

The final stage of the decision-making process is the pragmatic arbitration of price. While the ideal consumer choice was clearly "Certified Local," the reality of budgetary constraints often forced a painful compromise. The price cue was found to have a dual function:

- A Barrier and Source of Conflict: For most participants, a significant price premium on a local product created a state of cognitive dissonance. Andreea (P3) described her choice of a cheaper, imported alternative as a "painful compromise" that left her feeling "guilty" (translated from Romanian). Paul (P4), the 'Pragmatic Utilitarian,' framed it more rationally: "I don't see why I should pay a premium for something that offers no additional functional benefit" (translated from Romanian).
- A Signal of Quality and Risk: Conversely, a price that was "too low" was a powerful red flag, raising suspicions about the product's authenticity. As Mihai (P2) noted, "A low price makes me question the integrity of the entire production and certification system" (translated from Romanian). For consumers like Maria (P1), a higher price was even seen as a positive signal, an "investment in health."

To synthesize these findings, Table 5 illustrates how different consumer archetypes perceived the function of each cue within the decision-making hierarchy. Participant contributions are indicated for transparency, and the limitations regarding the generalizability of archetypes are explicitly noted.

Table 5. Perceptual Matrix of Cues by Consumer Archetype. Source: Supplementary File S2, Detailed, Anonymized Interview Summaries.

Cue (Decision Stage)	Majority View (e.g., Risk-Averse, Authentic Seeker)	Pragmatic/Utilitarian View	Deviant/Globalist View
1. Certification (Trust)	Non-negotiable pass/fail filter. Essential for consideration. (P1, P2, P3, P5, P6, P8, P9, P10)	Minimum quality checkbox. Necessary to enter consideration set. (P4)	Baseline requirement, but premium certifications preferred (P7)
2. Country-of-Origin (Emotion)	Strong local preference once trust established. Emotional/heuristic motivations. (P1, P3, P5, P6, P8)	Largely irrelevant if functional attributes are equal. (P2, P4, P9, P10)	Key quality signal. Prefers high-quality stereotype origins (e.g., Germany) over "local." (P7)
3. Price (Pragmatism)	Source of conflict and cognitive dissonance; trade-off between ideals and affordability. (P1, P3, P5, P6, P8)	Primary decision factor after certification confirmed. Seeks to minimize cost. (P2, P4, P9, P10)	Signal of quality/exclusivity; high price confirms premium, low price is a red flag. (P7)

Notes: Majority view: supported by 5–8 participants. Minority/Pragmatic view: supported by 3–4 participants. Deviant/Globalist view: supported by a single participant (P7). The matrix highlights patterns, but the archetype assignments reflect interpretative coding; external validation or quantitative segmentation was not applied. Limitations of generalizability should be acknowledged.

4. Discussion

This study set out to deconstruct the decision-making process for organic food in an emerging European market, aiming to move beyond quantitative rankings to understand the underlying cognitive and affective hierarchy of cues. Our findings reveal a nuanced, sequential framework, offering a deeper understanding of "how" and "why" consumers make choices, rather than just "what" they choose. This discussion interprets these findings by first presenting our proposed "Trust-Then-Emotion-Then-Pragmatism" model, then exploring its substantiated theoretical and practical implications, and finally acknowledging the study's limitations.

4.1. Theoretical Integration and Contribution to Existing Literature

To situate our study within the existing literature, it is important to clarify the fundamental concepts underlying this research. Organic foods are categorized as credence goods, meaning that key attributes—such as chemical-free production, ethical farming, or sustainability—cannot be directly verified by consumers even after purchase or consumption [4,6]. This unverifiability creates a structural information asymmetry, pushing consumers to rely on extrinsic cues, including certification labels, COO, and price, as proxies for hidden quality [5,6].

These cues are typically processed through a hierarchy of cues, a sequential evaluation mechanism where certain signals dominate and influence the interpretation of subsequent attributes [5–7].

Previous studies have mostly employed quantitative approaches, such as conjoint analysis, to estimate the relative importance of individual cues [3,4,7]. While informative about what consumers choose, these studies do not capture how and why decisions are made, particularly the cognitive sequencing and trade-offs that constitute the hierarchy [4].

This limitation is particularly relevant in emerging markets, where environmental awareness, localist preferences, and historical institutional distrust intersect with price sensitivity [9–13,16,17]. To address this gap, we adopt a qualitative, phenomenological approach [14,15,18,19], which allows us to explore not only which cues are prioritized but also the experiential and affective reasoning underlying consumer evaluations of certification, COO, and price.

From these insights, we propose the "Trust-Then-Emotion-Then-Pragmatism" model, a process-oriented framework integrating existing theories on credence goods, trust, COO effects, and price signaling. The model emphasizes that the importance of a given cue depends on its sequential position within the evaluation process, especially in emerging European markets [6,7,20,21].

Key contributions include:

- Contextualizing Organic Food: Explaining its characteristics and regulatory frameworks, including the EU organic logo, as a trust-enhancing signal [1,8,22].
- Integrating Foundational Theories: Linking the model to literature on credence goods, certification trust, COO effects, and price signaling [3–7,20,21].
- Highlighting Emerging Market Specificities: Emphasizing Romanian and Central-Eastern European consumer behaviors to capture local dynamics [9–13,16,17,23].
- Contributions and Future Directions: Advocating for process-oriented qualitative investigations to better understand consumer decision-making [14,15,18,19,24,25].

4.2. The "Trust-Then-Emotion-Then-Pragmatism" Model of Consumer Choice

Our central contribution is a three-stage model that frames consumer choice not as a simultaneous evaluation of cues, but as a sequential filtering process. This model directly challenges the assumptions of many quantitative conjoint studies, which often imply

that all attributes are weighed concurrently [3,4], by demonstrating a distinct hierarchical progression that begins with risk mitigation and moves towards emotional differentiation before pragmatic arbitration. This empirically derived sequence offers a nuanced understanding of how and why decisions are made, complementing the existing literature on cue utilization [5].

- Stage 1: The Trust Filter—Certification as a Non-Negotiable Prerequisite. This initial, cognitive stage is unequivocally dominated by the certification cue, particularly the EU organic logo. Its primary function is purely risk mitigation, a finding that strongly aligns with the literature on "credence goods," where consumers actively seek to reduce information asymmetry due to unobservable attributes [4,6]. In a context characterized by a "legacy of institutional distrust" [9,10] prevalent in emerging markets like Romania [9–13], the EU organic logo is perceived by our participants not merely as an attribute, but as a non-negotiable prerequisite. As vividly articulated by P1, Maria, the 'Risk-Averse Mother' (Table 5), "It's a brutal but necessary filter. . . If it's not there, I don't waste another second on that product." This sentiment, shared by 9 out of 10 participants (Table 4), underscores its role as a binary pass/fail gatekeeper. P2, Mihai, the 'Rational Optimizer,' further corroborated this, describing the logo as "a guarantee of a process, not a promise." Our participants delegate their cognitive trust to this standardized, transnational authority, underpinned by a comprehensive legal framework [22]. This perception firmly establishes the logo as a fundamental test of formal, institutional credibility that a product must pass before any other attribute can even enter consideration, a finding consistent with studies highlighting the EU logo's role in building trust [8].
- Stage 2: The Emotional/Heuristic Evaluation—Country-of-Origin as a Powerful Differentiator. For products that successfully pass the stringent trust filter, the decision-making process shifts significantly from a purely cognitive risk-assessment to a more affective and heuristic evaluation. Here, COO, specifically the "local" (Romanian) origin, emerges as the dominant differentiator (Table 4). This finding robustly aligns with extant research on the COO effect [7,21] and local food preferences [13,23], which highlight a complex interplay of motivations. Our data reveal that "local" acts as a powerful heuristic for perceived freshness and purity, with P8, Ioana, the 'Health-Conscious Preventer,' noting, "a product from Romania has traveled less. . . I feel it is closer to its natural state." Simultaneously, local origin triggers strong affective responses tied to community support, authenticity, and a sense of shared identity, as supported by 7 out of 10 participants (Table 4). P6, David, the 'Hedonistic Gastronome,' encapsulated this by stating, "Local honey. . . has a 'terroir'. I'm buying a piece of that story," illustrating the deep emotional connection consumers form with local narratives and provenance. This stage highlights the transition from a utilitarian evaluation of safety to a value-driven assessment of belonging and intrinsic quality, a distinction emphasized in the "Perceptual Matrix of Cues" (Table 5).
- Stage 3: The Pragmatic Arbitration—Price as the Final Reality Check. Finally, price acts as a "reality check," forcing a trade-off between the emotionally ideal choice (often the certified local option from Stage 2) and the consumer's economic reality. This is consistent with studies identifying price as a major barrier to organic consumption [4,24]. Our model, however, critically positions price not as the primary barrier that eliminates products ab initio, but as the final arbiter that frequently creates cognitive dissonance—a painful conflict between the consumer's values (e.g., supporting local producers) and their budgetary constraints, observed in 8 out of 10 participants (Table 4). P3, Andreea, the 'Authentic Seeker,' vividly described her choice of a cheaper, imported alternative as a "painful compromise" that left her feeling "guilty." Further-

more, price also functions as a quality signal in itself [20]. As P2, Mihai, observed, "A low price makes me question the integrity of the entire production and certification system," demonstrating that an unusually low price can trigger renewed suspicion, even for certified products. Conversely, a higher price for a local product can be interpreted as a validation of quality and fair labor, reflecting findings from the "Perceptual Matrix of Cues" (Table 5) regarding the "Deviant/Globalist View" (P7) where high price signals premium. This final stage underscores the complex interplay of ideals and practicalities that culminates in the purchasing decision.

This "Trust-Then-Emotion-Then-Pragmatism" model provides a more nuanced and empirically grounded framework for understanding consumer behavior in emerging organic food markets, suggesting that the importance and evaluative function of any given cue are highly dependent on its sequential position within the decision-making process, a key insight for marketers and policymakers.

4.3. Consumer Segmentation Beyond Demographics: The "Globalist" Archetype

The identification of the "globalist" consumer archetype, exemplified by Adrian (P7), is a critical finding with significant implications for market segmentation. This specific deviant case, detailed in Theme 2 ("Country-of-Origin as the Emotional and Heuristic Differentiator") and highlighted in the "Perceptual Matrix of Cues" (Table 5), where P7 explicitly stated, "I will always choose a product from Germany. . . I associate Germany with rigor, flawless processes, superior technology. To me, 'local' sounds like improvisation," robustly demonstrates that a consumer's underlying orientation—be it localist, globalist, or cosmopolitan [25]—can be a more powerful predictor of preference than traditional demographics alone. This challenges a homogenous view of consumer responses to origin cues and suggests that:

1. There is a distinct and potentially lucrative niche for premium, imported organic products that can successfully leverage strong, positive country-of-origin stereotypes. For this segment, the perceived quality and reliability associated with certain national origins [7,21] can completely override the localism effect observed in the majority of our participants. This is directly supported by P7's preference for German products over local ones, even after certification has established baseline trust, indicating a secondary, stereotype-driven quality assessment (Table 5). This suggests that international organic brands with strong positive country images could effectively target this "Globalist" segment in emerging markets, as these consumers prioritize perceived external quality over local sentiment.
2. Segmentation strategies should incorporate psychographic variables, such as consumer ethnocentrism, cosmopolitanism, and consumer animosity [4,25], to create more accurate and actionable consumer profiles, moving beyond broad demographic categories. The stark contrast between the majority's "emotional localism" (P5, P6, P8 in Table 5) and P7's "Globalist" perspective underscores the limitations of purely demographic segmentation. Our findings, particularly the "Deviant/Globalist View" in Table 5, imply that understanding these deeper psychological orientations is crucial for marketers to tailor communication and product offerings effectively, addressing either the strong community support motives for local products or the perceived superior quality of certain foreign origins.

4.4. Limitations and Future Research Directions

This study, like all qualitative phenomenological research [14,15], has its inherent limitations, which we acknowledge transparently. The purposively selected sample of 10 engaged urban Bucharest consumers, recruited through snowball sampling (Table 1),

provides theoretical depth and rich contextual understanding rather than statistical generalizability [18]. The perspectives captured may not fully reflect those of occasional organic buyers, consumers in rural populations, or individuals with significantly different socioeconomic backgrounds, particularly given the urban focus on early adopters of organic products [1,9,12]. Furthermore, this study explored stated perceptions and decision-making processes through semi-structured interviews (Table 2), which, while offering rich insights into cognitive and affective frameworks [14,15], can sometimes differ from actual in-store behavior due to time pressure, promotional influences, or other situational factors [4].

A further consideration pertains to the socio-demographic characteristics of the participants. While our purposive sampling aimed for diversity in professional backgrounds and ensured participants were regular organic food buyers, we acknowledge that factors such as household income, household size, and specific life stages (e.g., presence of young children, which often increases organic food consumption due to health concerns) can significantly influence purchasing decisions and price sensitivity for organic products. Our qualitative approach allowed us to explore the mechanisms by which these factors might interact with our identified cues (e.g., P1 Maria, 'The Risk-Averse Mother', driven by concerns for her child's health; P5 Cristina, 'The Budget-Conscious Patriot', frequently making compromises due to budget constraints, as detailed in Supplementary File S2). However, the small sample size precludes a systematic analysis of the direct impact or interaction effects of these specific demographic variables on the proposed hierarchy.

While the insights contribute to understanding consumer decision-making in emerging European markets, they specifically reflect the unique socio-cultural and economic context of urban Romania. The perspectives of occasional buyers or rural populations may differ, and the findings cannot be directly generalized to the diverse consumer segments across the broader European market.

These limitations, however, open up several fruitful avenues for future research:

- Quantitative Validation and Sequential Testing: The "Trust-Then-Emotion-Then-Pragmatism" model, derived from our qualitative findings (Themes 1, 2, 3 in Table 4), could be rigorously tested quantitatively using experimental designs. Specifically, eye-tracking studies combined with discrete choice experiments could provide objective data to validate the sequential nature of cue evaluation and quantify the relative weights of certification, COO, and price at each distinct stage of the decision-making process. Such studies would build upon existing quantitative research on cue importance [3,4,7] by incorporating a process-oriented dimension.
- Cross-Category and Cross-Cultural Exploration: Future studies could explore if this established hierarchy holds true for other types of credence goods (e.g., fair-trade products, animal welfare-certified products, eco-labeled non-food items) or in different cultural and economic contexts beyond emerging EU markets. For instance, investigating consumer behavior in other Central and Eastern European countries [16,17] would enhance the external validity and generalizability of our proposed model, while cross-cultural studies would allow for a deeper understanding of how specific country-of-origin effects [7,21] vary.
- Behavioral vs. Stated Intentions: Research employing in-store observational studies, neuroscientific methods (e.g., fMRI to explore emotional responses to COO), or analysis of household scanner data could help bridge the acknowledged gap between stated intentions and actual purchasing behavior [4]. This would offer a more holistic view of consumer choice by capturing unconscious biases or situational influences that our interview-based approach could not directly observe.
- Exploring the "Globalist" Archetype in Depth: Building on the identification of the "Globalist" archetype (P7 in Table 5), further qualitative and quantitative research

specifically targeting cosmopolitan consumers [25] could delve deeper into the specific country-image associations that drive their preferences, and how these interact with certification and price. This would provide valuable insights for segmenting markets beyond traditional demographics and designing tailored marketing strategies for both local and international organic brands.

5. Conclusions

This qualitative study meticulously deconstructed the complex decision-making process of organic food consumers in an emerging European market. We moved beyond a simple ranking of cues [3,4] to propose a sequential and empirically grounded "Trust-Then-Emotion-Then-Pragmatism" hierarchy, a key contribution to the understanding of consumer behavior for credence goods [4,6]. Our findings unequivocally demonstrate that a credible, transnational certification (the EU organic logo) acts as an essential, non-negotiable foundation of trust, serving as a primary filter for consideration (Theme 1, Table 4). This initial reliance on formal certification is particularly salient in emerging markets with a legacy of institutional distrust [9–13]. Once this initial trust is established, a powerful emotional and heuristic preference for local products emerges as the key differentiator (Theme 2, Table 4), activating values of authenticity, freshness, and community support, consistent with literature on localism and COO effects [7,13,23]. Finally, price acts as a pragmatic arbitrator, often forcing a difficult compromise between the emotionally preferred ideal and the financially affordable reality, frequently leading to cognitive dissonance (Theme 3, Table 4), a common challenge in organic food consumption [24].

To effectively promote sustainable consumption and support local agri-food systems in such contexts, stakeholders must design their strategies around this empirically derived hierarchy. Building trust through visible, verifiable certification, as mandated by current regulations [22], is the bedrock upon which all other marketing efforts must stand, mitigating the inherent information asymmetry of organic products [4,6]. On this foundational trust, compelling brand narratives that celebrate local origin can be built to capture the consumer's heart and foster emotional connection, leveraging insights from storytelling and visual marketing (Table 3, P9). Concomitant, realistic and strategically positioned pricing strategies must be employed to win the final battle in the consumer's mind, acknowledging the trade-offs between values and budget [24].

Building upon these qualitative insights, future research should focus on three specific, actionable next steps:

- Quantitative Validation and Sequential Testing: The "Trust-Then-Emotion-Then-Pragmatism" model could be rigorously tested using experimental designs such as eye-tracking combined with discrete choice experiments. Such approaches would validate the sequential nature of cue evaluation and quantify the relative weights of certification, COO, and price at each decision-making stage, building upon existing research on cue importance [3,4,7]. Future studies should also explicitly incorporate socio-demographic variables (e.g., income, household composition, education) as independent or moderating factors, enabling generalizable insights into how different consumer segments navigate the organic food market.
- Cross-Category and Cross-Cultural Exploration: Further research could investigate whether the established hierarchy applies to other credence goods (e.g., fair-trade, animal welfare-certified, or eco-labeled products) or across different cultural and economic contexts beyond emerging EU markets. Comparative studies in other Central and Eastern European countries [16,17] could enhance external validity, while cross-cultural research could clarify how country-of-origin effects vary [7,21].

- Behavioral vs. Stated Intentions: In-store observations, neuroscientific methods (e.g., brain imaging to explore emotional responses to COO), or household scanner data could help bridge the gap between declared intentions and actual purchasing behavior [4], capturing unconscious biases and situational factors that interviews alone cannot observe.
- Exploring the "Globalist" Archetype in Depth: Building on the identification of the "Globalist" archetype (P7, Table 5), further qualitative and quantitative research could examine the country-image associations driving their preferences, and how these interact with certification and price. Such insights would support market segmentation beyond demographics and inform tailored marketing strategies for both local and international organic brands.

By acknowledging these limitations while outlining clear directions for future research, this study demonstrates how qualitative insights can inform both theoretical development and practical applications, providing a foundation for subsequent quantitative validation and broader contextual exploration.

Supplementary Materials: The following supporting information can be downloaded at: https://www.mdpi.com/article/10.3390/agriculture15192023/s1, File S1: Semi-Structured Interview Guide; File S2: Detailed Interview Summaries.

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Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study are available in the supplementary material of this article. The supplementary material contains the semi-structured interview guide (File S1) and detailed, anonymized summaries of the interviews (File S2) that support the findings.

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

COO	Country-of-Origin
EU	European Union

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