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Climate Change Awareness and Urban Food Choices: Exploring Motivations for Short Food Chain Engagement

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Abstract: This study explores the relationship between climate change awareness (CCA) and consumers' willingness to pay (WTP) for urban short food chains (USFC), focusing on the mediating role of biospheric, egoistic, and altruistic environmental concerns. A structured questionnaire was conducted with 230 respondents in Tirana, Albania, and the results were analysed using the PROCESS macro in SPSS 25.0. The findings reveal that CCA increases all three environmental concerns; however, only the altruistic concern significantly mediates USFC participation, particularly by limiting food waste (effect size = 0.502, $p = 0.002$). In contrast, egoistic concern negatively affects WTP, highlighting a value–action gap in sustainable behaviour. Reducing ultra-processed food consumption emerges as a key driver of engagement, linking personal and environmental health to local food choices. Gender moderates these relationships; despite showing high ecological concern, women express lower WTP due to household and budgetary considerations. Supporting the model, the survey data show that 88% of respondents are willing to pay a premium, typically 10–20% more, for food products from their preferred origin, and 88% are also willing to participate in the Tirana USFC initiative. The highest WTP (30%) is reported among highly educated women with children aged three to five. These findings highlight the need for targeted urban food policies that account for sustainability's psychological and demographic dimensions.

Keywords: CCA; urban short food chains (USFC); environmental concerns; food waste; ultra-processed food; gender

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Academic Editor: Verónica Oliveira

Received: 17 March 2025
Revised: 10 April 2025
Accepted: 17 April 2025
Published: 25 April 2025

Citation: Kokthi, E.; Guri, F.; Dafku, Z. Climate Change Awareness and Urban Food Choices: Exploring Motivations for Short Food Chain Engagement. *Urban Sci.* **2025**, *9*, 142. https://doi.org/10.3390/urbansci9050142

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1. Introduction

While it contributes less to helping cities achieve food self-sufficiency, urban agriculture can set up a pathway to feed the citizens differently [1]. The 'in a different way' approach involves commercialising quality local products via short circuits, a sustainable model that significantly reduces the environmental footprint [2–8].

As a form of nature-based solution, urban agriculture contributes to climate adaptation by enhancing urban resilience, supporting biodiversity, and reducing food-related emissions [9–12]. Urban short food chains build on this foundation by reinforcing local food systems that reduce environmental impact and strengthen social cohesion and economic circularity within cities [13,14].

Urban short food supply chains (USFC) refer to localised food systems that shorten the distance between food producers and consumers within urban areas or their immediate surroundings. These systems typically involve direct sales models such as farmers' markets, community-supported agriculture, cooperatives, and urban food hubs, reducing

intermediaries and increasing traceability [13,15,16]. Although some definitions emphasise direct producer–consumer interactions, recent research suggests that USFC can take multiple forms, including municipal food procurement, cooperative models, and urban food networks [13,17].

USFC aims to promote fresh, minimally processed food, enhance food security, and support local economies, aligning with urban agriculture's broader sustainability goals.

While USFCs are widely promoted as environmentally friendly alternatives, some scholars argue that their sustainability depends on the efficiency of their logistics [4,18–20]. Unlike large-scale food distribution networks that benefit from optimised transportation routes and economies of scale, USFC may increase per-unit emissions due to fragmented and non-optimized transport, mainly when deliveries involve multiple small-scale producers serving dispersed urban consumers [19]. This challenge suggests that, while USFC provides advantages regarding food quality, consumer engagement, and support for local economies, their environmental impact requires careful assessment, particularly in urban contexts where transport efficiency varies.

Building on this perspective, USFC emerges as a key mechanism for bridging the gap between food producers and urban consumers. By localising food production and minimising intermediaries, USFC aligns with the broader objectives of urban agriculture, fostering more direct and transparent food networks. However, the effectiveness of these systems depends not only on logistical efficiency but also on consumer engagement and the social acceptance of local food models.

Urban agriculture brings producers and consumers closer and encourages cities to reinvent and rethink their deep-rooted relationship with food. In this relationship, local products are essential to creating producer–consumer relations in a globalised agro-food system [20]. Their unique selling proposition is based on the localisation of production and the supply chain length in terms of the number of actors involved [1,13,15,16]. The direct contact and partnership between producers and consumers underscore the distinctive nature of these systems. However, these partnerships can only be established with a shared narrative among stakeholders regarding short food chains in urban areas, which rapidly evolve in the continuous industrialisation of a food system. Understanding the initiating factors is essential for building a collective story and creating sustainable partnerships, emphasising the need for collaboration.

Climate change awareness (CCA) is a powerful driver of sustainable food practices in this context. However, psychological and social factors such as environmental concern often moderate the transformation from awareness into action. Drawing on [21], this study investigates how different types of concern—biospheric, egoistic, and altruistic—mediate the link between CCA and participation in USFCs.

Despite growing interest in USFCs, there is limited understanding of how climate-related awareness translates into food behaviours in urban contexts, especially through the lens of concern types. Addressing this gap will contribute to designing more effective strategies that align environmental messaging with consumer motivations.

This research contributes to the existing literature by introducing a multi-pathway model that links climate change awareness (CCA) to engagement in urban short food chains (USFCs). It identifies the mediating role of three distinct types of environmental concern—biospheric, egoistic, and altruistic—in shaping sustainable food behaviours. Furthermore, the study explores key consumer drivers influenced by climate-related concerns, such as reducing food waste, preference for seasonal and local products, and avoiding ultra-processed foods. The remainder of this study is structured as follows: Section 2 outlines the theoretical framework, variables, and methodology. Section 3 presents the empirical

analysis and findings. Section 4 offers a discussion of the results. Finally, conclusions and implications for policy and practice are presented.

2. Theoretical Framework and Methodology

2.1. Conceptual Framework and Hypotheses

Research shows that public CCA significantly influences consumer behaviour toward sustainable food practices, including participation in USFCs [13,16,22]. However, a gap between intention and action is often observed, motivating research into potential mediators such as environmental concern [23–25]. Schultz's (2001) environmental concern scale outlines three dimensions—biospheric, egoistic, and social-altruistic concern—which influence sustainable behaviour in distinct ways [21,26]. CCA is a significant predictor of biospheric concern, motivating individuals to prioritise ecological health and adopt sustainable consumption habits [27,28]. Personal benefits drive egoistic concern, while altruistic concern stems from a desire to help others and reduce environmental impact.

Research indicates that awareness of climate change is a significant predictor of biospheric concern, as individuals who are more informed about environmental issues are more likely to prioritise the planet's well-being and that of other living beings [21,29]. This heightened biospheric concern can lead to more sustainable consumption behaviours, such as increased participation in USFC, where the environmental impact of food choices is minimised [13,17,30]. Thus, the link between CCA and Biospheric Concern provides a foundation for promoting sustainable food systems through USFC. From this perspective, we suggest hypothesis H1, as presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Hypotheses linking CCA and environmental concerns to participation in urban short food chains.

Drivers	Pathway	Hypotheses
Biospheric concern	Path a_1: CCA → Biospheric Concern; Path b1: Biospheric Concern → USFC	*H1a: CCA positively influences biospheric concern*
		H1b: Biospheric concern positively affects participation in USFC
Egoistic concern	Path a_2: CCA → Egoistic Concern; Path b2: Egoistic Concern → USFC	*H1c: CCA positively influences egoistic concern*
		H1d: Egoistic concern positively affects participation in USFC
Altruistic concern	Path a3: CCA → Altruistic Concern; Path b3: Altruistic Concern → USFC	*H1e: CCA positively influences altruistic concern*
		H1f: Altruistic concern positively affects participation in USFCs

Source: authors' elaboration.

Similarly, studies have shown that CCA can also enhance egoistic concern as individuals become more aware of the potential impacts of environmental issues on their personal health, finances, and well-being [31–33]. This egoistic concern, in turn, can drive behaviours that align with personal benefits, such as participating in USFCs, which offer access to fresher, healthier, and potentially less contaminated food [34]. Moreover, the awareness of climate change fosters concern for the environment and highlights the personal advantages of sustainable practices; with this in mind, we suggest that CCA positively influences egoistic concern, subsequently enhancing participation in USFCs. See Table 1 for the suggested hypotheses and pathways.

CCA can significantly foster altruistic concern [28,35,36]. This concern, when embraced, often motivates actions that benefit the wider community and the environment. One such action is the support of the USFCs, which emphasise local, sustainable food

production and reduce the environmental footprint [37,38]. Thus, an increased awareness of climate change issues can drive individuals to participate in USFC, driven by a sense of responsibility and concern for others' well-being. CCA positively impacts altruistic concerns and promotes engagement in USFC.

Finally, our research proposes a significant positive relationship between CCA and participation in USFCs, as illustrated in Figure 1 (Path c': CCA → USFC). This relationship suggests that individuals more aware of climate change issues tend to perceive a greater personal responsibility to mitigate their environmental impact. This, in turn, leads to more sustainable consumption behaviours, such as buying locally produced food [25,39]. The importance of this direct relationship lies in its ability to independently motivate consumers to choose sustainable food practices, even without mediating specific environmental concerns such as biospheric, egoistic, or altruistic motivations [40,41]: see Figure 1a.

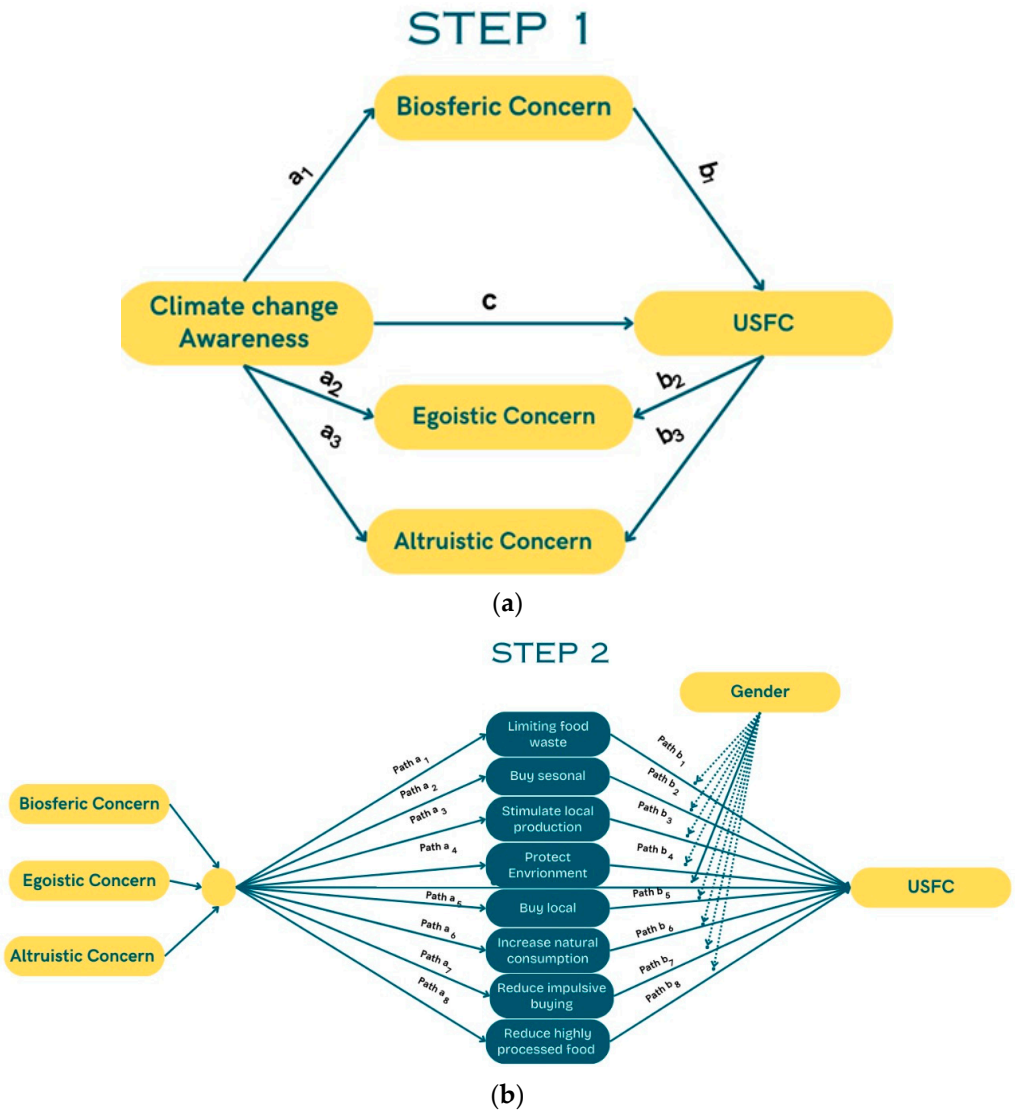

Figure 1. (**a**) Conceptual model illustrating the mediating role of biospheric, egoistic, and altruistic concerns in the relationship between climate change awareness and USFC engagement. Source: authors' elaboration. (**b**) The conceptual model illustrates the influence of biospheric, egoistic, and altruistic concerns on USFC engagement, mediated by specific sustainable behaviours. Source: authors' elaboration.

In the second step, climate change concerns are used as initiators to explore the possible pathways leading to willingness to participate in USFC (See Table 2 and Figure 1b).

USFC participation is often linked to eight key drivers of climate change concerns influencing consumer participation in USFCs. These drivers include limiting food waste [42–44], buying seasonal products [45,46], stimulating local production [2,47,48], protecting the environment, buying local products, increasing natural consumption, reducing impulsive buying, and reducing consumption of highly processed food.

Table 2. Possible pathways leading to willingness to participate in USFCs.

Drivers	Hypotheses	References
Limiting Food Waste	*H2.1: Climate Change Concern (CCC) → Limiting Food Waste → USFC*	[42–44,49,50]
Buying Seasonal Products	*H2.2: CCC → Buying Seasonal Products → USFC*	[2,48,51]
Stimulating Local Production	*H2.3: CCC → Stimulating Local Production → USFC*	[2,15,16,30]
Protecting the Environment	*H2.4: CCC → Protecting the Environment → USFC*	[46,52–54]
Buying Local Products	*H2.5: CCC → Buying Local Products → USFC*	[2,51]
Increasing Natural Consumption	*H2.6: CCC → Increasing Natural Consumption → USFC*	[47,48,52,55–58]
Reducing Impulsive Buying	*H2.7: CCC → Reducing Impulsive Buying → USFC*	[59–62]
Reducing Highly Processed Food Consumption	*H2.8: CCC → Reducing Highly Processed Food Consumption → USFC*	[63–65]

Source: authors' elaboration.

The hypotheses presented in Table 2 explore how the three climate change concerns (CCC) lead to consumer behaviours, such as limiting food waste, buying seasonal and local products, supporting local production, and engaging in environmentally protective actions, in alignment with USFC participation. Using the suggested framework, we comprehensively explore the distinct pathways through which different concerns affect consumer behaviour and provide critical insights into sustainable food systems supported by UFSC. The rest of the study is structured as follows: The second section presents the methodology. The third section presents the analysis of the results. The last section deals with the conclusions and discussions. The following section details the measurement and operationalisation of each variable proposed in the conceptual framework.

2.2. Questionnaire and Measurement of Variables

The instrument employed for this study is composed of four sections. In the first section, the demographic variables of respondents are collected. These variables, such as age, gender, household income, education, number of children, respective group age, etc., are crucial for understanding how different groups perceive and respond to environmental issues. See Table 3. The second section presents a question about CCA and environmental concerns (EC). The CCA is measured according to six statements as presented in Table 1: Are you aware of the danger of gas emissions from vehicles that harm people's health, etc.? The participants evaluated each statement with a five-point Likert scale (see Table 3). Environmental concern is explored using the [21] scale. The scale is made up of three subscales measuring the following factors: biospheric concern (e.g., "I am concerned about environmental problems because of the consequences for birds, plants, marine life,

animals"), egoistic concern (e.g., "I am concerned about environmental problems because of the consequences for me"), and social–altruistic concern (e.g., "I am concerned about environmental problems because of the consequences for all people". Concerns are also measured using a five-point Likert scale (1 = not at all concerned, 5 = extremely concerned).

Table 3. Description of the variables considered in the study.

Category	Description
Socio-Demographic Characteristics	City (Tirana), age, gender, educational level, family income, parenthood status, number and age of children
Climate Change Awareness (CCA)	Awareness of air pollution, vehicle emissions, water pollution, chemical fertilizers, green space loss, and land degradation (1 = not informed, 5 = very informed)
Environmental Concerns	Concerns about environmental impact on plants, marine life, birds, animals, self, health, future, all people, and children (1 = not concerned, 5 = extremely concerned)
Sustainable Consumption and Food Preferences	Preferred food sourcing for school catering, willingness to pay more, motivations for paying more (e.g., limiting waste, seasonal food, reducing processed food), understanding of sustainable food consumption

Source: authors' elaboration.

Section three explores preferences for food origin and willingness to pay for sustainable food options. The questionnaire assessed consumer preferences for food sourcing locality, willingness to engage with municipal food programs, and willingness to pay (WTP) for locally sourced food in school catering. Respondents were asked where they preferred school food to come from, with options ranging from imports (EU and general), regional sources, national (Albania), and local (municipality level). Additionally, WTP was measured according to a yes/no question and percentage-based increase options (10%, 20%, 50%, or above 50%). To explore engagement with municipal-led food programs, respondents were asked whether they would support a system where school food is sourced from seasonal agricultural production under municipal oversight. These questions provide insights into consumer attitudes toward local and urban food networks, aligning with the study's focus on USFC. This study examines consumer engagement with localised food-sourcing practices as a proxy for participation in USFC. While not all models explicitly require direct sales, literature on urban food networks suggests that short supply chains in cities often involve intermediary-supported initiatives [48]. Therefore, our questionnaire assessed engagement with locally produced seasonal food rather than strictly measuring direct producer–consumer relationships.

This section asks respondents about their propensity to participate in UFSC and their motivations: see Table 3. Finally, the questionnaire assesses the respondents' understanding of sustainable food consumption.

2.3. Research Design and Sample

The questionnaire was distributed online using convenience sampling. A sample of 230 respondents was collected from October 2023 to January 2024 in Tirana, Albania. This city is the capital of and the largest city in Albania. The number of inhabitants in Tirana is forecast to increase from 891,526,560 in 2021 to 954,280 in 2031 (up to 30%) (INSTAT, 2020).

Table 4 shows the primary demographics of the participants in the survey. About 90% are women, and 96% of the respondents are parents, with the majority aged 26–45 (about 80%). This reflects how urban short food chains often attract individuals in their prime working years with greater purchasing power and autonomy over their food choices.

Table 4. Demographics.

Demographics	Value	Frequency	Frequency Percentage
Gender	Female	208	91%
	Male	20	9%
Age	18–25	6	2.6%
	26–35	110	47.8%
	36–45	78	33%
	46–55	30	13%
	Over 55	6	2.6%
Educational Level	Up to 9 years	4	1%
	12 years	14	5%
	University degree	108	47%
	Post-university degree	108	47%
Monthly incomes Eur	100–300	6	2.6
	301–600	24	10.4
	601–900	74	32.5
	1000+	124	53.8
Parent	Yes	220	95.7
	No	10	4.3
Number of children	1	102	44.3
	2	118	51.3
	3	10	4.3
	4	-	-
	Over 4	-	-
Children's age	6 months–3 years	56	24.3
	3 years–5 years	56	24.3
	5 years–12 years	64	27.8
	12–15 years	16	7
	15–18 years	38	16.5

Source: authors' elaboration.

The younger age group (18–25) is underrepresented (2.6%), likely due to their reliance on family-based food-purchasing decisions, reducing their direct participation in short food chains. Similarly, individuals over 55 (2.6%) may exhibit different consumption behaviours, preferring traditional food retail formats over short food chain initiatives. The majority are highly educated. These sample characteristics are linked with the higher propensity of women to respond to online questionnaires and their expertise in using online survey instruments. However, this population segment is interesting to explore, since they might serve as part of the Albanian urban community that can snowball the partnership process between the producers and parents. Half of the participants have two children, and it

is interesting to consider whether this indicator impacts the parent's behaviour toward USFC participation. The predominance of women respondents and the high percentage of parents aged 26–45 could be considered a limitation due to potential sample bias, limiting the generalizability of the findings to a more diverse population. However, this also presents an opportunity, as the sample reflects a demographic with a keen interest in the topic and a higher propensity for engaging with online surveys, potentially providing rich insights into the behaviour and attitudes of this specific group. The Ethics Committee of the Agriculture University of Tirana, Albania, approved the questionnaire design and data collection process, ensuring compliance with ethical research standards.

2.4. Statistical Analysis

To achieve the study objectives, we applied a conditional process analysis that integrates mediation and moderation models [66–69]. The first model examines the mediating role of three environmental concerns (EC) types—biospheric, egoistic, and altruistic concerns—in the relationship between climate change awareness (CCA) and willingness to participate in USFCs. Mediation occurs when CCA influences EC, which in turn affects USFC participation. This model helps to identify which type of EC is most strongly affected by CCA and which EC type has the strongest effect on willingness to engage in USFC.

The second model incorporates moderation analysis, where demographic factors (e.g., gender) may influence the strength of the relationship between EC and USFC participation. Moderation implies an interaction effect, meaning that the predictor's effect (CCA or EC) on USFC participation can be enhanced, weakened, or even reversed depending on the moderating variable.

The PROCESS macro in SPSS was used to estimate these relationships, applying Model 4 for mediation and Model 5 for moderation, with bias-corrected 95% confidence intervals and bootstrapping to ensure robust estimations [66]. The equations for Model 4 and Model 5 are as follows:

Mediation model (Model 4—Step 1 Equation) (Figure 1a):

$$M(\text{Biospheric}) = iM + a_1(\text{CCA}) + e$$

$$M(\text{Egoistic}) = iM + a_2(\text{CCA}) + e$$

$$M(\text{Altruistic}) = iM + a_3(\text{CCA}) + e$$

$$Y(\text{USFC}) = iy + b_1(\text{Biospheric}) + e$$

$$Y(\text{USFC}) = iy + b_2(\text{Egoistic}) + e$$

$$Y(\text{USFC}) = iy + b_3(\text{Altruistic}) + e$$

$$\text{USFC} = b_1\text{EC} + c'\text{CCA} + e_2\text{USFC}$$

where:

EC represents environmental concerns (biospheric, egoistic, or altruistic)
CCA is climate change awareness
USFC is the willingness to participate in USFC
a Pathways captures the effect of CCA on EC
b Pathways captures the effect of EC on USFC participation
c' is the direct effect of CCA on USFC
e and e_2 are the error terms

Moderation model (Model 5—Step 2 Equation), See Figure 1b:

$$USFC = b_2EC + b_3(EC \times Moderator) + c'CCA + e_3USFC$$

where:

The interaction term EC × Moderator (e.g., gender) measures whether the strength of EC's effect on USFC participation changes based on the moderator, indicating the magnitude of the moderation effect.

The conceptual model integrates these variables by reducing their scales to regression scores, ensuring simplicity while retaining their statistical significance. Reliability tests (Cronbach's Alpha) confirmed high internal consistency for each construct: biospheric concerns (0.949), egoistic concerns (0.929), altruistic concerns (0.788), and CCA (0.947).

3. Results and Discussion

The study's findings on CCA among respondents are significant, revealing a high overall awareness level. A mean score of 4 on a 5-point scale indicates that respondents generally consider themselves well-informed about various environmental issues, underscoring the importance of the study's findings (See Table 5(1)). The highest mean score of 4.21 is related to awareness of the dangers of air pollution. This suggests that air pollution is particularly salient among the respondents, possibly due to visible effects such as smog or health advisories in Tirana City. Awareness of the environmental damage caused by chemical fertilisers and pesticides is also high, with a mean score of 4.17 (See Table 5(1)). This could be linked to increasing public discourse around sustainable agriculture and the push for organic products, highlighting conventional farming practices' environmental and health impacts. The score for awareness of water pollution dangers is 4.12, indicating a significant concern about water quality issues. Awareness of the dangers of insufficient green space and the degradation of cultivated land quality is lower, with mean scores of 4.03 and 3.86, respectively. This suggests that, while these issues are recognised, air and water pollution may take longer for the respondents to respond to. Overall, the high levels of awareness across these areas suggest a well-informed respondent group, particularly regarding issues that have immediate health implications or are frequently highlighted in public discussions on environmental sustainability.

Table 5. (1) Descriptive statistics of climate change awareness (CCA) items. (2) Descriptive statistics of environmental concern items across biospheric, egoistic, and altruistic dimensions. (3) Descriptive statistics of climate-driven motivations for participation in urban short food chains (USFCs).

(1)		
Question	Mean	StdD
Are you aware of the danger of vehicle gas emissions that harm people's health?	3.96	1.061
Are you aware that using chemical fertilisers and pesticides causes environmental damage?	4.17	0.952
Are you aware of the dangers of air pollution due to urbanisation?	4.21	0.881
Have you been informed about the dangers of water pollution?	4.12	1.046
Are you aware of the dangers of insufficient green space?	4.03	1.113
Have you been informed about the damage caused by the degradation of cultivated land quality?	3.86	1.214

Table 5. *Cont.*

(2)		
Concern for…	Mean	StdD
Plants	3.98	0.771
Aquatic life	4.01	0.778
Birds	3.92	0.831
Myself	4.55	0.660
My health	4.69	0.557
Children's health	4.78	0.479
My future	4.67	0.595
All individuals	4.59	0.640
(3)		
Driver	Mean	StdD
Buying locally produced foods to limit transportation	3.87	1.070
Increasing the consumption of natural foods	4.55	0.860
Promotion of local agricultural/livestock production	4.08	0.950
Purchase and consumption of seasonal foods	4.61	1.040
Reducing food waste	3.78	0.890
Reducing the consumption of highly processed foods	4.38	1.020
Reducing the excessive consumption that comes from impulsive purchases	4.15	1.010
The need to protect the natural environment	3.92	1.050

Source: authors' elaboration.

Table 5(2) presents the descriptive statistics for the environmental concern items measured across three dimensions: biospheric, egoistic, and altruistic. The results indicate that respondents most strongly expressed altruistic and egoistic concerns. Items such as *"Children's Health"* (M = 4.78, SD = 0.479), *"My Health"* (M = 4.69, SD = 0.557), and *"My Future"* (M = 4.67, SD = 0.595) received the highest average ratings, reflecting a strong egoistic orientation, where concern is linked to personal or familial well-being. This is closely followed by altruistic concern with *"All individuals"* (M = 4.59, SD = 0.640), suggesting a solid social responsibility toward others.

Conversely, biospheric concerns—related to non-human nature such as *plants* (M = 3.98), *aquatic life* (M = 4.01), and *birds* (M = 3.92)—show slightly lower mean values, though still relatively high. This distribution aligns with previous literature, suggesting that, while people acknowledge the importance of ecological well-being, personal and human-centred concerns often carry more weight in shaping behaviour [21,33]. As explored in our hypotheses, these findings are critical to interpreting the mediation effects of concern types in the pathway between CCA and participation in urban short food chains.

Parents' preference for food product origins indicates a strong inclination towards supporting local products, with 64% opting for those of Albanian origin and 32% preferring EU origin. However, the preference drops significantly to 13% when considering a narrower territory such as Tirana. This disparity might be attributed to concerns over product availability, quality, or perceived reliability from a smaller geographic area. Despite this, 88% of parents are willing to pay extra for food products from their preferred origin: they are typically willing to pay an additional 10–20%. This willingness to pay suggests a

substantial market demand for origin-specific products driven by factors such as perceived quality, safety, and support for local economies. The same high level of willingness (88%) to participate in the USFC initiative of Tirana further underscores the community's commitment to supporting local food systems. About 10% of parents were uncertain, and only 2% were unwilling to participate. Surprisingly, there were no statistical differences in the mean of the WTP for the made-in-Albania label and the made-in-Tirana label. This contradicts the assumption that the WTP for Tirana agricultural products would be higher due to the narrower production area. Other studies have shown that the difference in WTP is even more remarkable when the local claim is expressed as 'small farm or territory'. The narrower the territory, the higher the WTP [70,71]. A well-defined origin increases the ability of the consumer to process the information coming from this information stimulus [72]. However, the present study has yet to support this result. One possible explanation is the parents' need for knowledge regarding the capacity of the territory of Tirana to provide agricultural and food products. The collective illusion that cities do not produce food continues; parents, as consumers, play a crucial role in shaping this perception. They do not associate Tirana with a specific agricultural production area. Additionally, the characteristics of the Tirana population play a role. In the last thirty years, Tirana has hosted Albanian individuals immigrating from different regions from north to south; 30% of the Albanian population moved toward Tirana. This trend persists; new parents come to Tirana with their existing territory associations. One study [73] shows that young Albanians are highly attached to and aware of national issues. However, a commonly shared story linked to Tirana's territory and agricultural products is needed in this case.

This study examines consumer preferences for local food sourcing in school catering, including urban-scale procurement. However, it does not explicitly differentiate short food supply chains based on the number of intermediaries. Future research should investigate consumer willingness to engage with short food supply chains (0 or 1 intermediaries) versus broader local food systems, ensuring a more precise distinction in food network structures.

The analysis of the demographics concerning motivation shows that gender, age, education and the age of the children significantly influence people's motivation to pay an additional price to participate in USFCs. This underscores the importance of understanding the demographics of the consumer base. Parents with higher education levels and children aged three to five years old express the highest WTP, 30%. Concerning the relationship with demographics, parents with two children (F value = 3.434; p value = 0.034), above five years (F value = 5.535; p value = 0.000), prefer made-in-Albania products over other options. Parents with children under five years of age prefer products of EU origin because they trust EU food safety institutions more than Albanian ones and because of the perception of high-risk food illnesses for that specific age [74,75].

The municipality of Tirana and the related stakeholders should play a crucial role in transforming citizens' perceptions of agriculture in urban areas and creating the city's food identity. The latter can be built by understanding the parents' primary motivations for participating in the USFC of Tirana.

In addition, an analysis of parents' understanding of sustainable consumption and whether it is associated with their willingness to pay shows that about 60% of the participants claim they understand the concept of sustainable consumption, while 40% still need to. Among those who understand, most link sustainable consumption to the energetic aspect, such as the balance of energy intake and expenditure, while 24% associate it with the environmental impact of consumption. Most respondents (around 35%) believe that food consumption is sustainable when the energy value of the food consumed is equal to the body's energy expenditure. This highlights a significant focus on the nutritional aspect of sustainability, indicating that many parents prioritise the balance between food

intake and bodily energy needs. Interestingly, about 25% of respondents associate sustainable consumption with minimising the environmental impact of daily food consumption, showing an awareness of the broader environmental implications of their food choices. Approximately 15% of respondents consider zero food waste to be a critical component of sustainable consumption, which reflects an understanding of waste reduction as playing a part in sustainability efforts. Furthermore, around 12–15% of respondents link sustainable consumption to balancing plant and animal products in their diet and adjusting food costs to the family's financial capacity. These perspectives highlight a diverse understanding of sustainability, encompassing nutritional balance, economic considerations, and environmental impacts.

This analysis indicates that, while there is a substantial awareness of the energy balance aspect of sustainable consumption, there is also significant recognition of environmental impacts and waste reduction. Similarly, another factor that increases consumer interest in local products and USFC is the evolution of consumer preferences due to globalisation. Consumers, increasingly faced with uncertainty regarding the products they consume and their health effects, are considering alternatives, such as local or fresh products. These schemes are of particular interest to the agricultural systems of developing countries because they address the growing uncertainty of a specific segment of consumers concerning the food they consume [58,76].

Table 5(3) shows various motivations for participating in USFC and indicates that the most highly rated are 'Increasing the consumption of natural foods' and 'Purchasing and consuming seasonal foods', which score above 4.5. This high rating highlights the value and appreciation of fresh and seasonal products and natural foods. Other important motivations include promoting local agricultural/livestock production and protecting the natural environment, which scored around 4.1. This high rating suggests a strong concern for local economies and environmental sustainability. Conversely, 'Reducing food waste' and 'Reducing the consumption of highly processed foods' have slightly lower scores, indicating that, while these factors are essential, they may only be the primary motivators for some respondents. Exploring behavioural motivations within a rapidly evolving urban food environment—shaped by industrialisation, urbanisation, and the globalisation of food systems—provides valuable insights beyond pre-existing urban food chain structures. However, future research should further differentiate urban food chain mechanisms from broader short food supply chain engagement, ensuring a clearer understanding of consumer drivers and food system dynamics.

These motivations are critical components of the moderation mediation model used in the study, as they help us to understand the pathways through which climate change concerns and environmental awareness influence consumer behaviour and the willingness to engage with USFC. The analysis first investigates the direct and indirect effects of CCA on the willingness to pay (WTP) for USFC, as mediated by biospheric, egoistic, and altruistic concerns (see Table 6).

As shown in the methodology section, the second step involves analysing the impact of three types of environmental concern—biospheric, egoistic, and altruistic—on the willingness to pay (WTP) for USFC and the mediators linked to USFC.

CCA significantly increases biospheric, egoistic, and altruistic concerns. However, these concerns do not consistently translate into a willingness to pay for USFC. While CCA can increase concerns related to the environment, such as biospheric, egoistic, and altruistic concerns, these concerns do not always lead to actual behavioural changes, such as willingness to pay for USFC. This disconnect, often called the "value–action gap," is well-documented in environmental psychology [23,32,77,78]. It occurs because of various factors, such as financial constraints, perceived inconvenience [79,80], lack of trust [76],

and competing priorities that can inhibit the translation of environmental concerns into actionable behaviours. Additionally, the perceived personal relevance and urgency of environmental issues may vary among individuals [79,81], contributing to inconsistent behavioural outcomes despite similar levels of concern.

Table 6. Impact of climate change awareness on environmental concerns and their mediation of willingness to pay for urban short food chains.

Hypothesis	Path	R-Squared	(Effect)	*p*-Value	Interpretation
H1a: CCA → Biospheric Concern	Path a_1	0.111	0.252	<0.001	CCA significantly increases biospheric concern
H1b: Biospheric Concern → USFC	Path b_1	0.036	0.028 (Indirect)	>0.05	No significant indirect effect on USFC participation
H1c: CCA → Egoistic Concern	Path a_2	0.041	0.113	0.003	CCA significantly increases egoistic concern
H1d: Egoistic Concern → USFC	Path b_2	0.036	−0.102 (Indirect)	<0.05	Egoistic concern negatively mediates the effect on USFC participation
H1e: CCA → Altruistic Concern	Path a_3	0.024	0.076	0.023	CCA significantly increases altruistic concern
H1f: Altruistic Concern → USFC	Path b_3	0.036	0.062 (Indirect)	0.044	Altruistic concern positively mediates the effect on USFC participation
Total Effect of CCA on USFC	Total Path	0.036	−0.141	0.16	No significant total effect of CCA on USFC participation
Direct Effect of CCA on USFC	Direct Path	0.036	−0.129	0.223	No significant direct effect of CCA on USFC participation
Interaction Effects	M1- Biospheric, M2- Egoistic, M3-Altruistic	-	Not significant	-	Interaction effects were not significant

Source: authors' elaboration.

Altruistic concern's significant positive mediation effect on USFC participation suggests that altruistic motivations can enhance engagement in sustainable practices. This finding aligns with the existing literature that emphasises the importance of social and ethical considerations in consumer decision making, particularly sustainability [36,82]. Individuals motivated by the well-being of others and the broader community can engage in behaviours supporting environmental sustainability, such as participating in USFC. Additionally, 90% of the respondents are female parents, which is significant, as studies have shown that women are often more engaged in sustainability issues due to their roles in household management and childcare, which heightens their concern for future generations and environmental health [83,84]. Conversely, egoistic concern has a significant negative mediation effect, indicating that higher egoistic concern may reduce willingness to pay for USFC (See Table 7). Egoistic concern focuses on personal benefits rather than collective or environmental well-being. This perspective often leads individuals to prioritise immediate personal gains, such as cost savings or convenience, over long-term environmental benefits [32,35]. As a result, individuals with higher levels of egoistic concern may be less willing to pay for sustainable options such as USFC, which often require higher upfront costs or sacrifices for convenience.

Table 7. Results of biospheric, egoistic, and altruistic concerns as drivers of USFC.

H	OV	R^2 (ECB)	Coefficient ECB	*p*-Value ECB	R^2 ECE	Effect ECE	*p*-Value ECE	R^2 (ECA)	Coefficient ECA	*p*-Value ECA
H2.1	Limiting Food Waste	0.090	0.349	<0.000	0.036	0.200	0.009	0.111	0.393	<0.0001
H2.2	Buying Seasonally	0.101	0.304	<0.000	0.110	0.287	<0.000	0.188	0.423	<0.0001
H2.3	Stimulating Local Produce	0.156	0.439	<0.000	0.088	0.304	<0.000	0.172	0.468	<0.0001
H2.4	Protecting the Environment	0.154	0.404	<0.000	0.097	0.294	<0.000	0.166	0.425	<0.0001
H2.5	Buying Local Products	0.065	0.280	0.000	0.034	0.188	0.010	0.096	0.345	<0.0001
H2.6	Increasing Natural Conservation	0.156	0.394	<0.0001	0.126	0.321	<0.0001	0.218	0.473	<0.000
H2.7	Reducing Impulsive Buying	0.074	0.301	0.000	0.086	0.299	<0.0001	0.113	0.377	<0.000
H2.8	Reducing Processed Food	0.136	0.415	<0.0001	0.156	0.406	<0.0001	0.230	0.546	<0.000
H2.9	WTP (Overall Model)	0.131	0.6520 (Direct effect)	0.092	0.146	0.3387 (Direct effect)	0.318	0.122	0.6520 (Direct effect)	0.092
	Limiting waste	-	0.502	0.002	-	0.448	0.006	-	0.502	0.002
	Buying Seasonal ly	-	−0.207	0.534	-	−0.236	0.476	-	−0.207	0.534
	Protecting the environment	-	−0.297	0.158	-	−0.213	0.306	-	−0.297	0.158
	Stimulating local production	-	0.067	0.775	-	0.047	0.837	-	0.067	0.775
	Increasing natural consumption	-	−0.663	0.022	-	−0.731	0.011	-	−0.663	0.022
	Reducing impulsive buying	-	−0.323	0.096	-	−0.291	0.120	-	−0.323	0.096
	Reducing processed food consumption	-	0.370	0.095	-	0.418	0.054	-	0.370	0.095
	Buying locally	-	0.000	1.000	-	−0.017	0.919	-	0.000	1.000
	Interaction (gender)	-	−0.730	0.021	-	−0.560	0.032	-	−0.730	0.021

Source: authors' elaboration. Outcome variable = OV, EC (biospheric) = ECB, EC (egoistic) = ECE, EC (altruistic) = ECA.

The finding that the overall and direct effects of CCA on urban short food chain participation are insignificant highlights the complexity of translating awareness into sustainable consumer behaviour.

The analysis reveals that biospheric concern (EC Biospheric) significantly and positively impacts several drivers of willingness to pay (WTP) for USFC. The most pronounced direct effects of EC Biospheric are seen in the stimulation of local production (effect size: 0.4389, $p < 0.000$) and protecting the environment (effect size: 0.403, $p < 0.000$). This underscores the potential for positive changes in the food system, offering an anticipatory pathway. Moreover, increasing natural consumption (effect size: 0.393, $p < 0.000$) and reducing processed food consumption (effect size: 0.414, $p < 0.000$) are also strongly influenced by EC Biospheric, further reinforcing the potential for a healthier and more sustainable food system. While the direct effect of biospheric environmental concern (EC Biospheric) on (WTP) is not significant (effect size: 0.717, $p = 0.093$), this study reveals the significant indirect effects of limiting food waste (effect size: 0.456, $p = 0.004$) on WTP, underscoring their importance in the context of USFC and making the audience feel informed and aware of these crucial factors.

Increasing natural consumption shows a significant negative mediation effect (effect size: -0.595, $p = 0.033$). Cognitive dissonance might play a role here [85]. Consumers already engaged in increasing natural consumption might feel they are contributing sufficiently to sustainable practices. Therefore, they might perceive less need to further engage in USFC initiatives, viewing them as an additional or redundant effort rather than a complementary one. This leads to a decreased willingness to pay for such initiatives, as people believe their existing actions are adequate. Second, the perceived costs and accessibility issues associated with natural products can contribute to this negative mediation effect. Even though consumers recognise the benefits of natural products, they may associate them with higher costs or limited availability, especially in urban settings. This perception can make them reluctant to pay more for USFCs, which might also be perceived as an expensive or less convenient option. Lastly, saturation and the prioritisation of concerns might be at play. Consumers who are highly focused on natural consumption may prioritise sustainability concerns, such as reducing plastic use or energy consumption, over supporting local food chains [86]. This prioritisation can result in a lower WTP for USFCs, as these consumers allocate their resources and efforts to other environmental areas they consider more impactful or immediate.

Gender significantly moderates the relationship between EC Biospheric and WTP, with an important negative interaction effect (effect size: -0.865, $p = 0.024$). Specifically, EC Biospheric negatively impacts WTP for females (effect size: -1.013, $p = 0.007$) but not for males (effect size: -0.148, $p = 0.227$). One possibility is that women, who constituted 90% of the sample, might have a more nuanced view of environmental concerns, potentially reflecting greater awareness of the complexity and challenges involved in sustainable practices. Women are often more directly involved in food purchasing and preparation and may thus be more cautious about changes that could affect household routines or budgets, especially in urban areas where time and resources are limited. Prior research suggests that women are more engaged in sustainable food networks and local food purchasing decisions.

The role of women in sustainable food networks, such as USFCs, as well as their influence on local food purchasing decisions, is becoming increasingly important within the discourse on food security and environmental sustainability [87–89]. Women's involvement is critical for ensuring food security at the household level and in advancing community sustainability efforts [87,90]. Women's participation in sustainable food networks is underscored by their unique purchasing behaviours and motivations [88,91–93]. Research shows that women tend to prioritise environmental and social considerations more strongly than

men, making them more likely to purchase local and sustainably produced foods [94]. For example, studies highlight that women are often the primary decision makers regarding food purchases, which has a profound impact on family dietary diversity and overall nutrition [91,95]. Furthermore, women are increasingly aware of the social implications of their food choices, fostering more substantial support for local economies through informed purchasing decisions [96].

Women are also significantly involved in establishing and maintaining alternative food networks, which emphasize local food production and consumption. Their engagement in these networks often reflects a commitment to sustainable practices, community well-being, and ethical considerations in food sourcing [93,97,98]. For instance, initiatives such as food cooperatives, where women play a central role, enable collective action towards sustainable food sourcing while fostering community ties [98]. Such cooperative structures empower women through shared leadership and decision making and address barriers linked to individual purchasing power and access to sustainable food options [98]. In urban contexts, women's networks can enhance food security by enabling access to local and fresh produce while negotiating better purchasing conditions, such as buying on credit from informal vendors [88].

Women's active participation in urban sustainable food networks is critical for advancing environmental and social sustainability.

Our findings reveal that egoistic environmental concern (EC Egoistic) significantly influences various drivers of willingness to pay (WTP) for USFC. The largest direct effects of EC Egoistic are observed in reducing processed food consumption (effect size: 0.405, $p <$ 0.00) and increasing natural consumption (effect size: 0.320, $p < 0.000$). Stimulating local production (effect size: 0.303, $p < 0.000$) and protecting the environment (effect size: 0.294, $p < 0.000$) are also significantly impacted.

Although the direct effect of EC Egoistic on WTP is not significant (effect size: 0.338, $p = 0.317$), significant indirect effects through limiting food waste indicate an important mediation pathway (effect size: 0.447, $p = 0.006$). Increasing natural consumption shows a significant negative mediation effect (effect size: -0.731, $p = 0.011$). Gender significantly moderates the relationship between EC Egoistic and WTP, with a notable negative interaction effect. An interaction effect is the combined effect of two or more variables on the dependent variable (WTP). Consumers' budget constraints may influence the negative mediation effect of increasing natural consumption on WTP for USFC, as natural or organic products are often perceived as more expensive [99]. Additionally, it is important to understand that urban lifestyle constraints, such as time and convenience, play a significant role in consumer choices [100]. Scepticism about the benefits of natural foods and these lifestyle constraints may deter consumers from opting for natural consumption despite potential benefits [101].

The analysis also uncovers the significant influence of altruistic concern (ECA) on various drivers of willingness to pay (WTP) for USFC. The highest direct effect is observed in reducing processed food (effect size: 0.545, $p < 0.000$) and increasing natural consumption (effect size: 0.472, $p < 0.000$). These results highlight the potential of altruistic concern. The overall model for WTP reveals a non-significant direct effect of altruistic concerns (effect size: 0.652, $p = 0.091$). However, the indirect effects achieved through various mediators are of paramount importance. Limiting food waste shows the highest positive indirect effects on WTP (effect size: 0.502, $p = 0.002$), indicating intense mediation. Increasing natural consumption has a significant negative mediation effect (effect size: -0.663, $p = 0.021$). Gender plays a significant moderating role, particularly for WTP (interaction effect size: -0.729, $p = 0.021$).

The findings of this study align with those of previous research on environmental concerns and sustainable food choices. Like [45,46], our results confirm that biospheric concerns strongly influence preferences for natural and minimally processed foods, reflecting a broader trend in sustainable consumer behaviour. Additionally, the indirect effect of limiting food waste as a driver of willingness to pay (WTP) for USFC reflects the conclusions of [44], who highlight food waste reduction as a critical component of sustainability in local food systems.

Moreover, our findings regarding the role of egoistic concerns in processed food reduction are consistent with [56], who found that personal health concerns significantly drive sustainable food choices. However, unlike studies that emphasise a strong direct effect of CCA on behaviour [102,103], our results indicate that CCA alone does not directly translate into WTP for USFC but operates through mediating factors. This suggests that awareness must be paired with targeted interventions to bridge the value–action gap, a finding that expands on other [104] work on consumer trust in short food supply chains.

The demographic challenge of urban food perceptions in Tirana also connects with the literature on urbanisation and food system restructuring [2,15]. Similarly to findings from [48], our results indicate that urban consumers often lack strong associations between their city and food production, reinforcing the need for a shared narrative to integrate urban agriculture into food policy discussions.

4. Conclusions

This study examined the role of environmental concerns, specifically, biospheric, egoistic, and altruistic concerns, in mediating the relationship between climate change awareness (CCA) and willingness to pay (WTP) for urban short food chains (USFC). The research aimed to understand how these environmental concerns shape consumer behaviour and engagement in sustainable food practices, particularly in urban settings such as Tirana, Albania. Our findings contribute to the growing literature on sustainable food systems and provide a nuanced understanding of the mechanisms that link environmental awareness to sustainable consumer behaviour. H1: CCA significantly increases biospheric concern: this hypothesis was supported, as CCA was shown to increase biospheric concern (Path a1) significantly. However, the indirect effect of biospheric concern on WTP for USFC was not significant (Path b1), indicating that, while individuals care about environmental issues, this concern does not always translate into actual behavioural change, confirming the existence of the value–action gap. Regarding H2: CCA significantly increases egoistic concern, and this hypothesis was also supported. Our findings indicate that CCA significantly increases egoistic concern (Path a2). Still, this concern negatively mediated the relationship between CCA and WTP for USFC (Path b2), which suggests that people with stronger egoistic concerns are less likely to engage in USFC, as they prioritise personal benefits over collective environmental outcomes. Moreover, concerning H3: CCA significantly increases altruistic concern; this hypothesis was supported, with CCA significantly increasing altruistic concern (Path a3). Additionally, altruistic concern positively mediates the relationship between CCA and USFC participation (Path b3), highlighting the importance of social and ethical motivations in promoting sustainable food choices.

The study's primary goal was to explore how environmental concerns mediate the relationship between climate change awareness and willingness to pay for USFC. Our results align with this goal, showing that environmental concerns are significant mediators, though the effect is more complex than previously assumed. Specifically, while biospheric and altruistic concerns positively influenced USFC participation, egoistic concerns had a negative mediating effect. This reinforces the idea that consumer behaviour is influenced by environmental awareness and personal values and priorities.

Our study also advances the conceptual model by demonstrating that CCA alone cannot translate directly into sustainable behaviours. Instead, increased awareness and targeted interventions, such as reducing impulsive buying and promoting local production, can foster engagement in sustainable food practices. These insights are crucial for informing future research and policy development, particularly in addressing the industrialisation of food systems and the rise of ultra-processed food consumption.

Another important finding is the significant role of gender in moderating the relationship between environmental concerns and WTP for USFC. Our study found that women, who made up 90% of the sample, exhibited a more substantial negative interaction effect with biospheric concerns, suggesting that women may be more cautious about adopting sustainable food choices due to constraints related to household responsibilities and urban lifestyles. This aligns with global trends recognising women's pivotal role in shaping food systems, particularly in sustainable food networks. Their involvement is critical for advancing food security and sustainability at the household and community levels.

Despite its valuable insights, this study has several limitations concerning sample composition. The sample was predominantly composed of women (90%) and parents (96%), mainly due to the distribution of the questionnaire through school networks and parent groups. While this allowed us to capture the views of a critical demographic segment, those primarily responsible for food purchasing and household nutrition, it limits the generalizability of the findings to the broader urban population. Future research should aim to include a more balanced representation of genders, age groups, occupational backgrounds (including those in environmental fields), and residential areas (urban vs. peri-urban/suburban) better to reflect the diversity of consumers in urban food systems. Expanding the demographic scope will help capture the full spectrum of motivations, barriers, and engagement strategies needed to promote USFC participation across various consumer segments.

This study underscores the need for policy interventions that bridge the gap between awareness and action. While CCA alone does not directly influence WTP for USFCs, policies can leverage behavioural nudges, financial incentives, and local food initiatives to encourage sustainable food choices. Strengthening urban agriculture in Tirana's food narrative and public procurement policies favouring local produce, educational programs, and incentives for urban farming could significantly enhance consumer engagement in USFCs.

Furthermore, our findings contribute to the broader discourse on the European Green Deal and its alignment with EU policies, particularly the Farm to Fork initiative. Future research should provide concrete policy recommendations tailored to the local context, addressing key barriers such as limited consumer awareness, logistical inefficiencies, and institutional fragmentation that may hinder the development of urban short food chains. Additionally, exploring the role of digital technology, such as online platforms, mobile applications, and traceability tools, can offer innovative pathways to enhance consumer engagement, improve transparency, and scale up participation in USFC initiatives in urban settings.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, E.K. and F.G.; methodology, E.K. and Z.D.; software, E.K.; validation, F.G., formal analysis, E.K. and F.G. and Z.D.; investigation, E.K. and Z.D.; writing, E.K., F.G. and Z.D. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This study was conducted within the National Agency of Scientific Research and Innovation (NASRI) project. We would like to thank the NASRI for financing and contributing to this research.

Institutional Review Board Statement: This research was conducted following the ethical regulations of the Ethics Committee of the Agriculture University of Tirana. The Ethics Committee reviewed and approved the study protocol. All participants provided informed consent before they participated in

the study. The study complies with all institutional and national regulations governing research with human subjects.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all participants before their involvement in the study. Participants were informed that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time without consequence. The study involved completing a questionnaire, and participants were assured that their data would be kept confidential and used solely for research purposes. Anonymity was guaranteed, and no identifying information was collected or disclosed. Data privacy protocols were followed under the ethical guidelines of the Agriculture University of Tirana Ethics Committee.

Data Availability Statement: The data supporting this study's findings are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. Due to privacy and ethical restrictions, participants' data cannot be shared publicly. However, anonymised data can be provided to qualified researchers who meet the criteria for access to confidential information, which aligns with the guidelines set by the Agriculture University of Tirana Ethics Committee.

Acknowledgments: We express our sincere gratitude for the generous support of the National Agency for Scientific Research and Innovation (NASRI) in Albania, which enabled us to carry out this study. The financial support received for our project "Measuring Women's Social and Economic Impact as the Leading Actor for Poverty Reduction and Sustainable Development of Food Systems in Albani", based on Decision No. 10, date 21 July 2023, "On the approval of the financing of winning projects of the National Research and Development Program for the Period 2023–2024", is responsible for the significant success of the study.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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