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Value-Belief and Value-Identity Norms in Ethical Food Consumption: Investigating the Influence of Worker-Friendly Labels in Italy

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore the main behavioral drivers influencing the consumption of ethical food products in Italy, with a specific focus on customer purchase intentions and choices for foods that adhere to workers' rights. The issue of workers' exploitation in Italian agriculture is a pressing concern, frequently highlighted in media investigations. To address this aim, the study compares three theoretical models to identify the most effective in providing the most comprehensive explanation of the phenomenon under investigation. The theories of value-belief-personal norms (VBN) and value-identity-personal norms (VIP), along with a hybrid of these models, were examined using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling. The findings reveal that factors such as self-identity, awareness of consequences, and ascription of responsibility are significant predictors of the purchasing behavior regarding food products that respect workers' rights. Notably, the integrated VBN and VIP model (VBN-VIP) demonstrates the highest level of predictive accuracy. This research contributes to the literature on ethical consumption by offering robust empirical evidence supporting these theoretical frameworks. Similarly, food companies will benefit from gaining a deeper understanding of consumer behavior in relation to ethical practices, particularly those concerning workers' rights. By emphasizing their commitment to ethical standards, food companies can potentially influence consumer attitudes and intentions more effectively.

1 | Introduction

The human dimension of food systems has become a global social and economic concern (Christiaensen, Rutledge, and Taylor 2021; Lerro et al. 2018). According to the International Labour Organization (International Labour Organization 2021), more than 27 million people worldwide face exploitative labor conditions in both developing and developed countries, of which nearly 2 million exploited workers are employed in agriculture. Accordingly, in the last decades, this issue has attracted a growing interest among scholars and public institutions, and several qualitative and quantitative studies have been conducted

to orient food systems toward advancing economic, social, and cultural rights (Anderson 2008; Malanski et al., 2021; Palumbo & Sciarba, 2015). Hence, the inclusion of this goal among the targets of the 2030 Agenda (SDG 8.7) is to eradicate all forms of forced labor.

Despite the lacking nature of available data (Kalantaryan, Mazza, and Scipioni 2020; Kalantaryan et al. 2021), irregular forms of labor in Europe are more prevalent in agriculture than in other sectors (William and Horodnic 2018). According to ILO, over 60% of the European labor force employed in agriculture may be engaged in informal employment conditions that

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are highly susceptible to exploitative labor practices (William and Horodnic 2018). The European Union's fruit and vegetable (F&V) sector is one of the most vulnerable within agriculture to informal employment conditions and poor worker well-being. This vulnerability arises from the pressure on farmers to maintain low production costs (Palumbo, Corrado, and Triandafyllidou 2022) ensure "just-in-time" harvesting (Salvia 2020), accommodate the sector's higher reliance on manual laborers (Martin 2016). Among EU countries, the Italian F&V sector is particularly sensitive to these issues (Melossi 2021). For instance, according to the Italian National Statistics Institute, undeclared work has increased steadily over the last decade, reaching 24.1% according to the latest statistics (ISTAT 2021). This is particularly true in F&V sector, where the relationship between migration and irregular hiring is widely debated in the literature from different research fields (e.g., Howard and Forin 2019; King, Lulle, and Melossi 2021; Melossi 2021; Perrotta and Raeymaekers 2023) and in the media for the fatal consequences of the phenomenon on workers. Labor conditions in the Italian F&V sector, particularly in tomato production, have received widespread coverage in Italian media during the past decade (Corrado 2011; Dines 2023; Perrotta 2015). This has generated extensive debates on the safety and rights of agricultural workers. Media coverage serves as a source of social norms that can influence consumer behavior (Yanovitzky and Stryker 2001). However, the coverage often presents polarized viewpoints, influenced by the political stance of the newspapers (Carnibella and Wells 2022). Despite awareness of media bias, the Italian public's perceptions of this issue are not well-defined (DellaVigna and Gentzkow 2010). Moreover, the linkage between increased public awareness of labor conditions, and the subsequent consumer shift toward products with socially responsible certifications, underscores a complex interplay between awareness, values, and consumption behavior. This occurrence could represent an interesting case, enriching the understanding of the dynamics of ethical consumption.

Studies on ethical consumption have proliferated in recent years (Ribeiro-Duthie, Gale, and Murphy-Gregory 2021), showing growing attention of people toward foods produced paying attention to social issues and labeled with socially responsible certifications. For instance, several contributions have examined the Fairtrade label, specifically for products made in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, by assessing consumers' willingness to pay (WTP) mainly for coffee (Basu and Hicks 2008; de Pelsmacker, Driesen, and Rayp 2005) and chocolate (Didier and Lucie 2008; Rousseau 2015), highlighting in most cases the positive effect of ethical certification in orienting consumers' choices. In the meanwhile, a smaller body of evidence concerns the F&V products, reporting similar results (McCluskey, Durham, and Horn 2009; Miller et al. 2017; Rossi et al. 2024). However, while the focus of the previous studies has largely been on the consumers' preferences of ethical food—how much consumers are willing to pay—they often neglect the behavioral factors that influence these preferences. When these aspects have been analyzed, the studies have generally relied on broad models like the theory of planned behavior (TPB; Ajzen 1991) and Norm Activation Theory (NAT; Schwartz 1977) and their extensions. In most cases, the type of food products is not specified (e.g., D'Souza et al. 2020; Eberhardt et al. 2021;

Wang and Chou 2020), or the studies focus on fair trade foods, such as coffee, cocoa, and tea mainly produced in the Global South (Canova, Bobbio, and Manganello 2023; Robichaud and Yu 2022). Consequently, limited research examines the behavioral intentions behind purchasing ethically produced food in Western countries. F&Vs, a category often associated with labor exploitation even in these regions, have been particularly overlooked despite the critical hotspots such as Spain or Italy (Rye and Scott 2018). Accordingly, the use of a well-structured behavioral approach is advocated to better understand the complexity behind the individual motivations that drive ethical F&V consumption. Previous studies have provided important lessons on these aspects, offering more comprehensive explanations of ethical consumption drivers. In this regard, consumer identity along with personal norms, which are defined as "cultural phenomena that prescribe and proscribe behavior in specific circumstances" (Hechter 2001, xi), are among the most significant determinants of ethical products consumption (Andorfer and Liebe 2013; Chatzidakis, Kastanakis, and Stathopoulou 2016; Ladhari and Tchegnna 2015; Shaw and Shiu 2003). Schenk (2019) proposes a systematic comparison of three behavioral models to go beyond the analysis of individual determinants and investigate the causal relationships that result in fair trade consumption. Comparison of the norm-activation model (NAM), value-belief-norm theory (VBN; Stern et al. 1999), and value-identity-personal norm model (VIP; van der Werff and Steg 2016) indicates that VIP yields more robust results than NAM and VBN. Furthermore, the author proposes a new model that combines VBN and VIP elements, leading to even more robust explanations, even though it has no precedent in the literature.

In light of the above, the present study aims to address the lack of research on ethically produced food in Western countries, with a particular focus on intentions and choices related to F&V that respect workers' rights, as well as to expand both the understanding and empirical application of behavioral models in this context. The investigation was based in Italy, given the relevance of workers' issues in Mediterranean/Italian agriculture and the increasing media attention, in order to analyze consumers' behavioral intentions toward a worker-friendly labeled F&V product. First, this study implemented a partial least squares structural equation model (PLS-SEM) based on three different behavioral models, the VBN, VIP, and the combined VBN-VIP models, and then the results were compared in order to generate "positive" knowledge (Alvesson and Sandberg 2013) identifying the most robust explanation of the phenomenon under investigation. To the best of our knowledge, this study represents the first empirical application of the above-mentioned structural models to examine the main behavioral components of Italian consumers in the context of ethical food choices.

The study offers relevant theoretical and managerial implications. On the theoretical level, a comparison of two different theoretical models enables to identify the theoretical framework and its corresponding behavioral constructs that most effectively predict specific consumer actions toward ethical food purchasing. From a practical perspective, the results of this study offer useful insight to managers and policy-makers. For the former, the results allow them to reflect on the appropriateness of adopting social sustainability strategies, also

in relation to consumer interest in food products obtained without the exploitation of workers and appropriate communication strategy based on the most relevant drivers. On the other hand, policy-makers can benefit from the information on motivational drivers in order to effectively target public campaigns to encourage ethical choices.

The paper is structured as follows: first, a brief review of the literature on the application of behavioral approaches in ethical food consumption research is presented. Then, the theories implemented by the present work are described to formulate the research hypotheses. This is followed by a description of the methodology, the results, their discussion, and general conclusions.

2 | Theoretical Background

2.1 | Ethical Consumption and Behavioral Approaches

Ethical consumption is a broad term that encompasses various dimensions of sustainable consumption (Harrison, Newholm, and Shaw 2005), including “all the principles of environmental consumerism and more—taking on board the ‘people’ element of ethical consumerism” (Strong 1996, I). Prior studies have highlighted the presence of many factors that lead to an ethical purchase gap due to skepticism of fairness claims (Nicholls and Lee 2006) or price and quality barriers (Boulstridge and Carrigan 2000), conceptualized as the “myth of the ethical consumer” (Carrigan and Attalla 2001). Consequently, studies rooted in behavioral economics aim to advance theoretical approaches, delving deeper into the exploration of factors that influence attitudes and intentions leading to the purchase of ethical products, including food.

Among the major determinants affecting ethical consumption, several contributions have mainly highlighted the role played by attitudes (Canova, Bobbio, and Manganelli 2023; de Pelsmacker and Janssens 2007; Shaw and Shiu 2003), information about fair trade issue (Berki-Kiss and Menrad 2022; Prasad et al. 2004), perceived trustworthiness (Eberhardt et al. 2021), self-identity (O'Connor, Sims, and White 2017), ethical obligation (Wang et al., 2020; Ozcaglar-Toulouse, Shiu, and Shaw 2006), and personal values (Ladhari and Tchegna 2015; Doran 2010). Previous studies have largely referred to Ajzen's TPB (1991) and Schwartz's NAT (1977) (Andorfer and Liebe 2013). According to the TPB, also in extended versions (Beldad and Hegner 2018), ethical consumption results from individual intentions which are influenced by attitudes, social norms, and perceived behavioral control. The extended applications of TPB have been used to measure the role of subjective knowledge, information, self-identity, socially responsible attitudes, environmental attitudes, corporate loyalty, and global orientation (Ladhari and Tchegna 2015). However, although much evidence has been produced on the application of TPB in ethical consumption, the gap between intentions and behavior leads one to question the validity of the theory on this category of product (Kossmann and Gomez-Suarez 2019; McDermott et al. 2015). According to the NAT, the consumption of ethical products is influenced by Personal Norms (PN) that are moderated by the awareness of

consequences (AC) of purchasing actions and by the ascription of responsibility (AR). NAT explains prosocial behavior as the sacrifice of consumers' self-interest in favor of the well-being of others (Zerbini, Vergura, and Latusi 2019). Therefore, low levels of awareness and attribution of responsibility neutralize personal norms in driving fair trade purchases (see, for instance, Canova, Bobbio, and Manganelli 2023 and Zerbini, Vergura, and Latusi 2019). However, NAT is underrepresented in research on ethical consumption. Additionally, Schenk's (2019) systematic comparison revealed no evidence of AC and AR mediating fair trade consumption within NAT. Notably, a direct effect from AR on fair trade consumption was observed. Considering the moderation effects observed in other behavioral contexts (Govaerts and Olsen 2022; Liebe, Preisendörfer, and Meyerhoff 2011), it is plausible that NAT might not provide sufficiently comprehensive explanations in the context of fair-trade consumption. In support of this argument, Louis and Lombart (2024) emphasized, in the context of behavioral intentions toward CSR products, that an integrative model is needed—one that incorporates both consumers' general attitudes and those shaped by the interaction between a specific brand or label and individual perceptions of it. A similar approach was followed by Kolling et al. (2023), who employed their own conceptual frameworks distinct from the TPB and NAT. These two findings are particularly significant, as they support that the relationship between personal norms and prosocial behavior, especially in the context of purchasing ethical products, can be more complex than what is proposed by the TPB and NAT. This issue aligns with the aim of this study, which seeks to address the shortcomings of these approaches by employing alternative conceptual models that may offer more accurate explanations of worker-friendly food purchase intentions.

2.2 | VBN, VIP Models, and Research Hypothesis

Based on Schwartz's NAT generalization, Stern and colleagues (Stern, Dietz, and Kalof 1993; Stern et al. 1999) developed the VBN model in the case of environmentalism to expand the range of valued objects by NAT. The VBN model is based on Schwartz's observation of the presence of altruistic values in social movements (Schwartz 1992, 1994), which he labeled universalism (UNI). This model links pro-environmental behavior to the values possessed by a person. This model links pro-environmental behavior to an individual's values. Unlike the NAT, in the VBN model the personal norms are not moderated by AC and AR but are influenced by direct and indirect effects. AR is influenced by AC which in turn depends on the attribution of universal values (see Figure 1). These universal values do not refer to a specific context but pertain to a universal vision of desirable goals held by individuals (Schwartz 2007). The theory initially considered the New Ecological Paradigm (NEP) as a universal value, but later evidence has shown that values have more robust effects on AC than NEP construct (Steg et al. 2011). In recent years, the VBN model has been applied to study various food purchasing patterns, such as green consumption (Jebarajakirthy et al. 2024; Zhao et al. 2021), healthy consumption (Carfora et al. 2020; Lai et al. 2020), and socially responsible purchasing (Golob et al. 2019; Stringer, Mortimer, and Payne 2020), demonstrating its broad applicability and the validity of its causal chain. Specifically, the positive relationship between universal values, AC, and AR has been

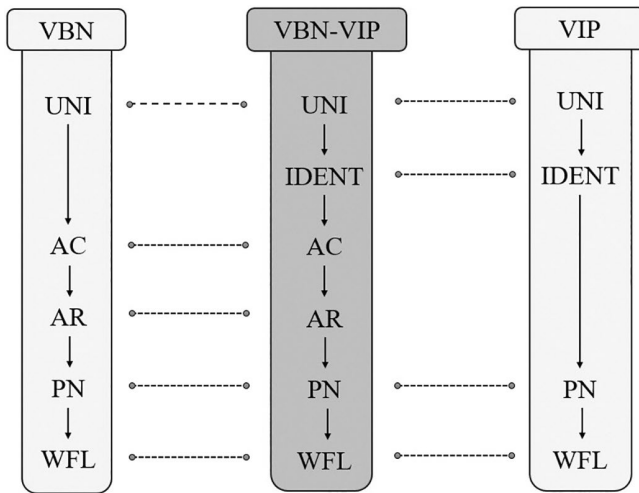


FIGURE 1 | Representation of the constructs of the VBN, VIP models and their combination (VBN-VIP).

identified as a robust mechanism for explaining personal norms across contexts, including healthy consumption (Borusiak and Kucharska 2023) and environmental concerns (Lai et al. 2020; Onel 2024). Moreover, Golob et al. (2019) showed that the VBN approach offers a comprehensive explanation of prosocial behavior in the context of CSR. However, its application to ethical food consumption remains underexplored.

Building on the previous evidence, this paper investigates the application of the VBN model to ethical F&V consumption. Although evidence specific to this scenario is limited, ethical food consumption, as a form of prosocial behavior, is expected to be comprehensively explained by the VBN model in terms of purchase intentions. Drawing on the approach of Schenk (2019), this study examines the direct and positive effects of universal values on AC, as well as the indirect, progressively weaker effects on subsequent variables in the causal chain. Furthermore, it is hypothesized that AR and AC will mediate the relationship with personal norms, distinguishing the VBN model from the NAT. These arguments lead to the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1. *AC and AR have a significant mediating effect and a positive influence on PN.*

Hypothesis 2. *UNI has a significant effect and a positive influence on AC.*

The VIP model was also primarily developed to explain pro-environmental behavior (van der Werff and Steg 2016). It has been less frequently used in the context of ethical food consumption compared to the models mentioned earlier. It differs from VBN in the presence of the self-identity measure (IDENT) instead of AC and AR constructs. The VIP model proposes a causal chain from values to personal norms that directly influence ethical consumption through the mediation of the self-identity construct. This novel factor represents the consumer's self-perception as critical and responsible for the social consequences of their purchase actions. Even though VIP implementations are scarce, self-identity has been extensively used in extended versions of the TPB (Ateş 2020; Zaman et al. 2023) and has been found to significantly describe

the purchase intentions of green consumers (Mehmood et al. 2024).

In ethical food consumption, several studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of IDENT in predicting consumer behavioral intentions using TPB (Hanel and Basil 2023; O'Connor, Sims, and White 2017). For example, the study of Shaw and Shiu (Shaw and Shiu 2002) found that self-identity, as antecedent of attitude, had a positive effect on improving the explanatory power of the TPB in the case of ethical consumption. A similar result was found in Beldad and Hegner (2018), where the construct of self-identity was found to be a positive and significant determinant of fair-trade purchase intention. Although these findings are outside of the VIP framework, they support the idea of the significant role of self-identity. Recent contributions have demonstrated the validity of the VIP model in explaining the drivers of prosocial behavior (Ajibade and Boateng 2021; Floress et al. 2022; Zhang et al. 2024). Accordingly, it is expected that the VIP model will also offer a deeper understanding of ethical F&V purchasing intentions. Based on this, the study posits the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3. *IDENT has a significant mediating effect and a positive influence on PN.*

Finally, according to Schenk's (2019) results, the VIP model provides a more robust explanation than the VBN model. Furthermore, for the first time, a combined VBN-VIP model has been implemented, resulting in even higher goodness of fit values. The latter includes IDENT between UNI and AC of the VBN model. This result is particularly important considering the novelty of this approach and the lack of studies that have applied the VIP model. The VBN model, the VIP model, and their combination are compared to understand which theoretical approach is more valid in the context of ethical food consumption. Based on the three models, this study finally tests the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 4. *The combined VBN-VIP model provides higher explanatory power than single models in predicting behavioral intentions toward the purchase of worker-friendly labeled F&V products.*

3 | Materials and Method

3.1 | Data Collection and Survey

To test the study's research hypotheses, data were collected in Italy from November 2023 to March 2024 via an online questionnaire using a convenience sample of individuals. Respondents were invited to participate through social media platforms leveraging their network of relationships. Although snowball sampling can lead to several risks of sample bias, limiting the representativeness and external validity of the findings, it remains an efficient technique for gathering data, particularly in studies addressing sensitive topics (Parker, Scott, and Geddes 2019). This method also facilitates the recruitment of larger sample sizes, potentially increasing statistical power in specific contexts (Emerson 2015). Accordingly, while the sample obtained allows for testing the study's research hypotheses, generalizing the measurement of behavioral constructs to a specific population falls beyond its scope. Indeed, the minimum

sample size was set at 400 to ensure a correlation among constructs of $\rho=|0.15|$ and to achieve a statistical power $(1-\beta)$ of 0.90. Participants were informed about the anonymity and purpose of the data collection and were asked to sign the informed consent form, stating that they were at least 18 years old. The first section of the questionnaire included two questions regarding the frequency and regularity of F&V consumption. Following this, the items concerning the different behavioral models were presented. A translation of Schenk's (2019) items was conducted, with references to the Third World removed (see Appendix A). Behavioral intentions toward purchasing worker-friendly labeled F&V products (WFL) were assessed using a 1–7 scale. This broader scale was chosen, rather than a narrower one, to capture more nuanced variations in respondent behavior, as recommended by Schenk (2019). The scale ranged from 1 “Never” and 7 to “Several times in one week” and was used to assess the frequency of consumption with the question: “How often do you intend to buy F&V food products with worker-friendly labels?” The intentions construct was not employed as an intermediate variable but rather as a proxy for final consumption behavior. This approach aligns with previous studies, which suggest that when attitudes are measured via survey statements, the direct measurement of behavior may introduce bias (Frommeyer et al. 2022; Morwitz and Munz 2021). UNI was measured by three items related to the commitment to equality, empathy, and environmental responsibility, emphasizing global harmony and understanding (Doran 2010). The construct of PN was evaluated by two elements measuring the moral imperative to engage in the purchase of fair-trade commodities, coupled with the attendant sense of moral obligation arising from selecting conventional alternatives (Sparks, Shepherd, and Frewer 1995). IDENT was measured by two items that refer to the consumers' view of themselves as consumers responsible for social consequences (van der Werff, Steg, and Keizer 2013). AC was measured by three items consisting of the belief that consumption of fair-trade products can improve the fairness of the food system. AR was measured by two items referring to the belief that people in Italy are responsible for decent work in agriculture.

The final section, prior to the socio-demographic questions, gathered data on respondents' perceptions of the fairness of employment in agriculture in comparison to other economic sectors. The survey asked about three aspects of working conditions: remuneration, incidence of labor abuse, and workplace safety. Only one questionnaire was removed from the analysis due to the implausible socio-demographic answers provided.

3.2 | Empirical Approach

To investigate consumer intention toward the purchase of food products with worker-friendly labels, a PLS-SEM approach was implemented. In the social sciences, structural equation models provide a powerful tool for analyzing relationships between latent constructs (Boccia and Sarnacchiaro 2020). However, within the class of SEMs (Bollen 1989), there is ongoing debate regarding the performance of common approaches, such as Covariance-Based SEM (CB-SEM) (Jöreskog 1970) and PLS-SEM (Hair et al. 2019; Jannoo et al. 2014). The choice of a specific SEM approach depends

on the characteristics of the study and dataset. For instance, CB-SEM assumes variable normality, normality of error terms, and a sufficiently large sample size (Wold 1982). Conversely, PLS-SEM has less stringent assumptions and demonstrates better performance in contexts involving complex structural models, theoretical extensions of established theories, small sample sizes, and non-normally distributed data. (Hair et al. 2019). Furthermore, PLS-SEM is a well-established methodology widely used in the study of consumer preferences for food in both observational and experimental settings (Raimondo et al. 2022). Therefore, given these characteristics and the non-probability sampling method adopted in this study, PLS-SEM represents a robust method to address the research questions. It consists of measurement models that predict relationships between latent variables and their component items and structural models that show relationships between latent constructs themselves (Venturini and Mehmetoglu 2019). Regarding the measurement model, internal consistency of tests and measures was estimated for each construct using Cronbach's alpha reliability (Cronbach 1951), with a threshold value of >0.7 , even though values between 0.6 and 0.7 are still acceptable (Kline 2023). Further, a correlation analysis between socio-demographic variables and the latent constructs has been conducted by Pearson correlation at 99%, 95%, and 90% confidence level. Moreover, an independent group t-test was carried out to compare score means of latent constructs between socio-demographic classes. For the purposes of age categorization, respondents were grouped into those born prior to 1981 (Millennials) and younger, and those born before (non-Millennials). This classification is based on the observation that individuals born after 1981 tend to exhibit more pro-social behavior (Connel, McMin, and Bell 2012), also in the case of fair-trade consumption (Aksoy and Özsonmez 2019). Regarding education, the respondents were divided into university graduates and individuals with less than a bachelor's degree. With respect to household income, the respondents were divided into two classes based on the distribution of the sample, with those who declared to belong to the first class of income (monthly income $<€2000$) and those who did not. Once VBN, VIP, and VBN-VIP were specified, the internal validity of the latent constructs was estimated considering values >0.5 of the factor loadings, $\rho_A >0.7$, and average variance extracted (AVE) >0.5 .

4 | Results

4.1 | Descriptive Analysis

The final sample consists of 446 respondents whose characteristics are shown in Table 1. From the initial sample of 447 respondents, only one questionnaire was omitted from the dataset for illogical answers. The sample is mainly represented by women (65%) with an age between 18 and 34 (50%), a higher level of education (75%), and a monthly household income between 2000 and 4000 euros (38%). The sample presents a strong concentration in modal classes, showing overall a high frequency of well-educated young people.

The Pearson correlation test indicated a significant and positive correlation between age and all latent constructs, while sex exhibited the opposite pattern (Table 2). Regarding income level, the results show a negative correlation between higher

income and latent constructs, while the stated frequency of consumption did not yield significant results. Furthermore, education level was also negatively correlated with WFL.

TABLE 1 | Descriptive sample statistics.

Variables	Categories	Frequency	Percent (%)
Age	18–34 years	221	49.55
	35–54 years	139	31.17
	55–74 years	85	19.06
	≥ 75 years	1	0.22
Gender	Male	153	34.31
	Female	290	65.02
	Other	3	0.67
Education	High school	10	2.24
	Secondary school	101	22.65
	University	244	54.71
	Post university	91	20.40
Monthly household income	≤€2000	142	31.84
	€2001–€4000	169	37.89
	≥€4001	64	14.35
	n.a.	71	15.92

Table 3 shows the results of the t-test conducted among independent groups. The results indicated a negative and statistically significant difference between millennials-younger and older in all latent constructs mean scores. This implies that, on average, older respondents reported different and higher levels of values than the youngest. The sex of respondents resulted in a significant influence on the behavioral constructs in all cases except for IDENT and WFL. Female respondents exhibited higher and significantly different mean scores in UNI, AC, AR, and PN. The two groups of educational level showed a low but significant difference only in WFL. While, regarding income level, statistically significant differences were observed only in PN mean scores among the two groups.

4.2 | PLS-SEM

Results show that Cronbach's α values indicate good overall reliability of the items included in the model (Tables 4,7, and 10). Universalism's reliability is discrete, with a Cronbach's α of 0.613. Although the value is less than 0.7, it is in line with the measurement obtained by Schenk (2019). The personal norm's reliability is good, with Cronbach's α value of 0.811. Self-identity showed an acceptable value of 0.841 as well. The Cronbach's α value for AC was 0.58, indicating insufficient reliability. To solve the issue, the second item of the construct was removed due to low factor loading. As a result, the construct's reliability increased to 0.758. Finally, the reliability of the AR measure showed a good value of 0.837. Table 4 summarizes the results of the VBN measurement model. The values of rhoA and AVE are for all constructs above the threshold of 0.7, except for the UNI latent construct.

TABLE 2 | Pearson correlation test results.

Sociodemographic characteristics	UNI	IDENT	AC	AR	PN	WFL
Age	0.189***	0.268***	0.134***	0.175***	0.234***	0.193***
Sex (= 1 if female)	0.174***	0.062	0.160***	0.123***	0.119**	0.060
Education	0.002	0.047	−0.021	−0.019	−0.032	−0.098**
Net income	−0.070	−0.025	−0.036	−0.049	−0.096*	0.003

Note: Significance level 0.10, 0.05, 0.01 indicated by *, **, *** respectively.

Abbreviations: AC, awareness of consequences; AR, ascription of responsibility; IDENT, self-identity; PN, personal norm; UNI, universalism; WFL, behavioral intentions.

TABLE 3 | Two-sample t test with equal variances between independent groups.

Sociodemographic characteristics	UNI	IDENT	AC	AR	PN	WFL	
Age	Millennials and younger ($n = 251$)	−0.332***	−0.503***	−0.293***	−0.373***	−0.443***	−0.287***
	Non millennials ($n = 195$)						
Sex	Female ($n = 290$)	0.365***	0.129	0.335***	0.259***	0.249**	0.126
	Male and other ($n = 156$)						
Education	Graduated and post ($n = 335$)	−0.006	0.043	−0.154	−0.142	−0.023	−0.203*
	Not graduated ($n = 111$)						
Income	≥€2001 monthly income ($n = 233$)	−0.158	−0.101	−0.110	−0.162	−0.294***	−0.099
	≤€2000 monthly income ($n = 142$)						

Note: Diff = mean (first group) − mean (second group). Significance level 0.10, 0.05, 0.01 indicated by *, **, *** respectively.

Regarding the VBN structural model (Table 5), consistent with literature findings, the PN construct appears to be a significant descriptor of WFL consumption ($\beta=0.317, p\text{-value}<0.01$) (Table 5). PN is directly explained by the constructs of AR ($\beta=0.231, p\text{-value}<0.01$) and AC ($\beta=0.340, p\text{-value}<0.01$), confirming H1. H1 is also supported by the significant and positive causal relationships of UNI on AC ($\beta=0.342, p\text{-value}<0.01$) and AC on AR ($\beta=0.456, p\text{-value}<0.01$). However, due to the mediation effects, distant latent constructs showed low effects with no significance in some cases, such as UNI on PN, UNI on WFL, and AC on WFL. Indeed, the indirect effects shown in Table 6 demonstrate the role of PN in

mediating the effect of AR and AC on WFL, as the mediation effect of AC in the UNI-PN causal relationship. Therefore, the impact of AC extends beyond the subsequent construct and also indirectly affects PN, supporting H1. Additional indirect effects. AR and AC both have indirect effects on WFL, which are mediated by PN. Additionally, significant influences are observed in more distant relationships. UNI seems to have indirect effects on AC-mediated PN formation.

Furthermore, hypothesis H2 is confirmed, as UNI's influence on AC is significant. The model's absolute goodness of fit (GoF) value is 0.40, and the average R² is 0.22.

Table 7 shows the results for the structural equation model of the VIP model. All constructs present rhoA and AVE values above 0.5, except for the UNI latent construct. According to this model, PN is explained by the construct of self-identity that replaces AC and AR of the VBN model.

Regarding the VIP model, the results presented in Table 8 support hypothesis H3, indicating that IDENT provides a significant influence on PN ($\beta=0.431, p\text{-value}<0.01$). Furthermore, the self-identity construct also exhibits a positive and significant effect on WFL ($\beta=0.420, p\text{-value}<0.01$). Unlike the VBN model, the VIP model showed a positive and significant effect of UNI on PN. The only causal relationship that was not found to be significant was that between the first variable of the chain, UNI, and the last, WFL. The indirect effects also supported H3 by demonstrating the significance of the effect of UNI on WFL mediated by PN, and the role played by IDENT in mediating the effect of UNI on PN and WFL (Table 9). Concerning the GoF of the model, the results do not align with those of Schenk (2017). In fact, the VIP exhibits lower values than the VBN model, with GoF of 0.38, and the average R² equal to 0.20.

Finally, Table 10 shows the results of the combined VBN and VIP models as proposed by Schenk (2019). The model incorporated the AC and AR constructs between IDENT and PN of the

TABLE 4 | Measurement of the PLS-SEM for value-belief-personal norm model (VBN).

Item/Construct	UNI	AC	AR	PN	WFL
UNI1	0.697				
UNI2	0.699				
UNI3	0.841				
AC1		0.902			
AC3		0.893			
AR1			0.928		
AR2			0.927		
PN1				0.912	
PN2				0.922	
WFL					1
Cronbach α	0.613	0.758	0.837	0.811	1
rhoA	0.651	0.759	0.837	0.813	1
AVE	0.560	0.805	0.860	0.841	1

TABLE 5 | Results for the structural equation model of the value-belief-personal norm (VBN) theory. Standardized path coefficients.

β					β				
PN	→	WFL	0.317	***	AC	→	PN	0.340	***
AR	→	WFL	0.135	**	UNI	→	PN	0.020	
AC	→	WFL	0.026		AC	→	AR	0.456	***
UNI	→	WFL	0.020		UNI	→	AR	0.203	***
AR	→	PN	0.231	***	UNI	→	AC	0.342	***

Note: Significance level 0.10, 0.05, 0.01 indicated by *, **, *** respectively.

TABLE 6 | Significance testing of (standardized) indirect effects for VBN theory.

Statistics	AR→PN→WFL	AC→PN→WFL	AC→AR→PN	UNI→AC→PN
Indirect effect	0.073	0.108	0.105	0.116
P	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
Confidence interval	(0.035, 0.111)	(0.062, 0.153)	(0.057, 0.153)	(0.072, 0.161)

Note: Confidence level: 95%.

VIP model and tested various combinations of direct effects on WFL. The rhoA and AVE values are also good, all above the previously indicated threshold values, except for the construct of UNI with rhoA = 0.655. The direct effect exhibited a similar pattern to that observed in the previous models (Table 11). The PN constructs were found to be explained by positive and significant relationships from AR ($\beta = 0.140$, p -value < 0.01) and AC ($\beta = 0.299$, p -value < 0.01), while IDENT also provided significant effects on both AC ($\beta = 0.267$, p -value < 0.01) and AR ($\beta = 0.246$, p -value < 0.01). Furthermore, significant results on WFL are observed from the PN construct ($\beta = 0.189$, p -value < 0.01). As in the previous models, the effects are significant between adjacent latent constructs, and no significant effects are observed between distant variables, such as UNI on PN or UNI on WFL. In this regard, the indirect effects shown in Table 12 demonstrate that IDENT significantly mediates the effect of UNI on WFL, PN, AR, and AC. This result shows that indirect effects limit the strength of direct effects on more

distant constructs. Regarding the model's goodness of fit, the analysis revealed the highest values among the three models, with an absolute GoF value of 0.44 and an average of $R^2 = 0.25$. Therefore, H4 is confirmed.

5 | Discussion

This study aims to examine the key behavioral drivers influencing the consumption of ethical food products in Italy, particularly focusing on consumer intentions to purchase F&V food products that support workers' rights. All the models implemented suggest that the act of engaging in workers' friendly consumption is driven by personal norms that are seen as a moral obligation to engage in pro-social behavior. The three patterns compared in this study attempt to identify which causal chain better mediates the effect of universal values in determining personal norms through different behavioral models. Many relevant findings can be discussed from the comparison carried out.

First, the present study finds that AC positively influences AR, and both have a significant mediating effect as well as a positive influence on PN, which is consistent with previous empirical evidence on ethical consumption in which similar hypotheses were supported within the VBN model (Golob et al. 2019; Schenk 2019). Furthermore, the awareness of the purchasing consequences plays a major role in driving consumers to recognize their individual responsibility toward the issue of labor exploitation. This sense of responsibility, in turn, affects the construction of personal norms that encourage prosocial behavior. AC by itself was found to be a significant and positive descriptor of PN, also in line with several exploratory studies, even if these studies did not specifically implement the VBN model (Zerbini, Vergura, and Latusi 2019) or did not focus on ethical consumption (Gomes et al. 2022; Liobikienė and Juknys 2016; Long et al. 2022). The influence of AC on AR was also found to be significant and positive in the VBN-VIP model, coherently with Schenk (2019), reinforcing the thesis of the role played by the awareness of consumption consequences and the recognition of the self-responsibility of Italian consumers in the construction of personal norms.

TABLE 7 | Measurement of the PLS-SEM for value-identity-personal norm (VIP).

Item/Construct	UNI	IDENT	PN	WFL
UNI1	0.673			
UNI2	0.701			
UNI3	0.855			
IDENT1		0.924		
IDENT2		0.934		
PN1			0.899	
PN2			0.933	
WFL				1
Cronbach α	0.613	0.841	0.811	1
rhoA	0.671	0.844	0.833	1
AVE	0.559	0.863	0.840	1

TABLE 8 | Results for the structural equation model of the value-identity-personal norm (VIP) theory. Standardized path coefficients.

β				β			
PN	→	WFL	0.205 ***	IDENT	→	PN	0.431 ***
IDENT	→	WFL	0.420 ***	UNI	→	PN	0.088 **
UNI	→	WFL	-0.028	UNI	→	IDENT	0.308 ***

Note: Significance level 0.10, 0.05, 0.01 indicated by *, **, *** respectively.

TABLE 9 | Significance testing of (standardized) indirect effects for VIP theory.

Statistics	IDENT→PN→WFL	UNI→IDENT→WFL	UNI→IDENT→PN
Indirect effect	0.088	0.129	0.133
P	0.000	0.000	0.000
Confidence interval	(0.046, 0.131)	(0.083, 0.176)	(0.086, 0.179)

Note: Confidence level: 95%.

TABLE 10 | Measurement of the PLS-SEM for the combination of value-belief-personal norm (VBN) and value-identity-personal norm (VIP) theories.

Item/Construct	UNI	IDENT	AC	AR	PN	WFL
UNI1	0.688					
UNI2	0.704					
UNI3	0.844					
IDENT1		0.924				
IDENT2		0.933				
AC1			0.901			
AC3			0.894			
AR1				0.931		
AR2				0.923		
PN1					0.906	
PN2					0.927	
WFL						1
Cronbach α	0.613	0.841	0.758	0.837	0.811	1
rhoA	0.655	0.844	0.759	0.839	0.819	1
AVE	0.536	0.845	0.819	0.855	0.851	1

TABLE 11 | Results for the structural equation model of the combination of value-belief-personal norm (VBN) and value-identity-personal norm (VIP) theories. Standardized path coefficients.

β				β			
PN	→	WFL	0.189 ***	UNI	→	PN	-0.025
AR	→	WFL	0.042	AC	→	AR	0.389 ***
AC	→	WFL	0.014	IDENT	→	AR	0.246 ***
IDENT	→	WFL	0.409 ***	UNI	→	AR	0.149 ***
UNI	→	WFL	-0.040	IDENT	→	AC	0.267 ***
AR	→	PN	0.140 ***	UNI	→	AC	0.260 ***
AC	→	PN	0.299 ***	UNI	→	IDENT	0.307 ***
IDENT	→	PN	0.300 ***				

Note: Significance level 0.10, 0.05, 0.01 indicated by *, **, *** respectively.

TABLE 12 | Significance testing of (standardized) indirect effects for VBN and VIP combined theory.

Statistics	UNI→IDENT→WFL	UNI→IDENT→PN	UNI→IDENT→AC	UNI→IDENT→AR
Indirect effect	0.125	0.092	0.082	0.076
P	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
Conf. interval	(0.079, 0.172)	(0.054, 0.130)	(0.046, 0.118)	(0.042, 0.0109)

Note: Confidence level: 95%.

Second, in line with Schenk (2019), this study finds that UNI has a significant and positive influence on AC. This finding within the VBN framework is consistent with previous research on consumers' prosocial behavior (Betzler, Kempen, and Mueller 2022; Pasquariello et al. 2024), which has found the same significant

relationship between values and AC. This result strengthens the values-beliefs-norms chain in explaining the act of purchasing workers-friendly products, unlike Zerbini, Vergura, and Latusi (2019). The latter, in their extended NAT implementation on fair trade consumption, achieved a consistent effect of

AC on PN, but neglected to consider antecedent AC and AR. Consequently, by supporting H2, this study sheds light on the importance of enriching causal chains to achieve more comprehensive explanations of ethical consumption. Both behavioral models in this study showed the relevance of values as a starting point in the causal chain. Therefore, an individual's set of values can translate into practical beliefs about purchasing acts. This finding is also relevant as it suggests that consumers' value orientation and behavior may be related to general fairness beliefs, as demonstrated in other ethical consumption paradigms such as green (Peattie 2010) or animal welfare-friendly food (Cembalo et al. 2016).

Third, this study confirms that IDENT positively influences PN, indicating that Italian consumers who identify themselves as responsible for the social consequences of their purchasing choices tend to be more oriented toward worker-friendly food products. This finding is in line with Schenk (2019), where the VIP model was implemented and IDENT resulted significantly linked to the PN construct and is also consistent with other empirical evidence based on the self-identity extended TPB (Chatzidakis, Kastanakis, and Stathopoulou 2016; D'Souza et al. 2020; Kumar et al. 2023; O'Connor, Sims, and White 2017). In addition, although AC and AR were found to be relevant in explaining PN according to the results obtained, the VIP model provided similar explanatory power to the VBN model. This could be because the items of IDENT include in their meaning both awareness and AR (van der Werff, Steg, and Keizer 2013). However, in the VBN-VIP implementation, the results showed that the co-presence of IDENT, AC, and AR still provides significant influences of both on PN. Therefore, this finding revealed the importance of self-identity as a key factor influencing socially responsible behavior, which also affects AC and AR, highlighting the need to include this construct in behavioral models. Indeed, the role of self-identity in stimulating sustainable purchase intentions is in line with previous studies (Hanel and Basil 2023; Luan 2023; Sharma et al. 2022; Zaman et al. 2023) in which IDENT was found to positively impact the behavioral intentions of consumers. This result is also confirmed by the indirect effects showing that IDENT mediates the effect of UNI on PN, as indicated by van der Werff and Steg (2016). Furthermore, by confirming H4, this study finds that the VBN-VIP model provides greater explanatory power than single models in predicting the behavioral intentions toward purchasing worker-friendly labeled F&V products.

The goodness of fit of the three compared models suggests that AC and AR alone are not sufficient to fully explain WFL, that IDENT synthesizes AC and AR and enriches the explanatory power of the model, and finally that the inclusion of both constructs does not affect the significance of the individual latent variables. This is despite the strong correlation between each variable and its direct successor in the causal chain. This finding suggests that a theoretical synthesis of the VBN and VIP models is reasonable. According to this combined model, universal values are responsible for subjects' recognition as a responsible consumer, which in turn affects the subjects' beliefs. Thus, the VBN-VIP model represents a conceptual step further than Stern et al.'s (1999) framework, implying that beliefs result indirectly from values and directly from the perspective one takes on oneself (Rise, Sheeran,

and Hukkelberg 2010). This extension is valuable given that UNI and IDENT measure different latent dimensions in people. While the former pertains to universal altruistic values, IDENT reflects socio-demographic characteristics, social traits, and personality (Thoits and Virshup 1997). Therefore, this set of individual characteristics measured by IDENT affects the concern for one's own responsibility, which in turn influences the personal norms in the combined VBN-VIP model.

6 | Conclusions, Implications, and Future Research Directions

The labor conditions in food production are a matter of public interest that is receiving growing attention in both public discourse and literature. In this field, literature on ethical consumption through the behavioral theoretical modelling approach aims to investigate what factors drive consumers to engage in fair trade purchases. This study compares three theoretical frameworks to explain ethical food consumption with the aim of identifying which of the models proposed in the literature most comprehensively explains consumer choices. Following Schenk's (2019) research, the present study used PLS-SEM to compare VBN, VIP, and a combination of both models. The results indicate that personal norms and self-identity are factors that influence the behavioral intentions to purchase worker-friendly labeled F&V products. According to the VBN model, personal norms are influenced by the degree to which an individual holds themselves responsible for the consequences of their purchasing decisions and the guilt they feel for not making more socially sustainable choices. The VIP model assumes that ethical choices are driven by recognizing oneself as a socially concerned consumer, which is based on universal, non-situational values that acknowledge universal rights. The combined VBN-VIP model that integrates these two theoretical approaches by incorporating both self-identity and the elements present in VBN into a single structural model found that this combined model addressed limitations of the individual frameworks by providing a more comprehensive understanding of the role of the antecedents of personal values in ethical consumption decisions.

These study findings represent a valuable contribution to improving current knowledge on behavioral approaches to worker-friendly labeled food products. Additional latent variables may be included to advance the model. For instance, given the context of the workers' issues and the role that trustworthiness plays in empirical studies of ethical consumption (Eberhardt et al. 2021; Konuk 2019), it is possible that the inclusion of this variable in the VBN-VIP model may further increase the explanatory power as a moderating or activating effect of PN on WFL. Improving understanding of structural patterns related to ethical food consumption can have significant implications for businesses. Identifying the appropriate communication strategy to adopt in the case of controversial social issues is a risky aspect that can damage the reputation of businesses and industries (Aktar 2013). As observed by Carrigan and Attalla (2001), despite price and quality outweighing ethical drivers in purchase behavior, the awareness may still be relevant. Consumers need to be convinced by companies that their behavior can make a difference in ethical terms. Given the strong relationship between PN and WFL, these study findings suggest that companies should convince consumers that purchasing food

that is beneficial to workers is a morally responsible act. This can be achieved through advertising campaigns and product packaging, which should explicitly convey the fairness of WFL food and strengthen consumers' empathy for labor exploitation issues. Additionally, as a lack of consumer awareness can negatively affect CSR (Nave and Ferreira 2019), companies should establish channels of communication with all stakeholders to develop the most effective strategies to fit their expectations (Agudo-Valiente, Garcés-Ayerbe, and Salvador-Figueras 2015). For example, the establishment of a virtuous circle involving the sharing of codes of conduct among the various actors in the supply chain could enhance the social performance of the system, thereby conferring benefits upon the consumer. From a managerial perspective, companies committed to addressing global social issues, such as labor exploitation, should engage in a clear and extensive reporting strategy for CSR initiative results to increase trust and awareness among their stakeholders, as highlighted by Dal Mas et al. (2022). For instance, given the effect that AC and AR have on WFL, marketing strategies should aim to raise consumer awareness of the consequences of their purchasing attitude by showing how ethical certification ensures decent working conditions. In particular, communication campaigns should promote social justice messages through their products and inform that the worker-friendly label provides adequate wages, safe work environments, and fair opportunities to convince consumers that buying WFL food can have a positive effect in improving the fairness of the agri-food system. For example, Fairtrade International represents an effective, multi-faceted approach to improving the social sustainability of food systems by supporting small-scale farmers, enforcing strict guidelines regarding labor issues, and committing to transparency.

The study has some limitations. The snowball sampling method employed does not allow for obtaining representative samples of the population based on sociodemographic variables. In addition, the non-representative sample size restricts the generalizability of the findings. Therefore, while the research hypotheses were tested, the characteristics and the size of the sample do not permit the inference of the estimated coefficients to a broader population. Further limitations include the potential intention-behavior gap, as stated intentions may not consistently translate into actual consumption behaviors, thereby limiting the study's ability to predict real-world outcomes reliably. In addition, this study does not implement a comparison with any extended model of the TPB or NAT. A systematic comparison of the conceptual models used for the study of ethical consumption could extend the analysis to these approaches. Also, given the result of the VBN-VIP model in terms of goodness of fit, future studies could investigate its reliability by implementing this model in other dimensions of ethical food consumption, such as health, environmental, and animal welfare concerns. Alternatively, other factors such as trustworthiness and subjective knowledge, which have been identified as crucial elements in previous studies on ethical food consumption, could be further investigated.

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Appendix A

Items of VBN and VIP models.

Variable	Item	Mean	SD
Behavioral intentions (WFL) (1 = 'Never'; 7 = 'Several times in one week')			
WFL	How often do you intend to buy F&V food products with worker-friendly labels?	3.33	1.71
Universalism (UNI) (1 = 'Not at all like me'; 6 = 'Very much like me')			
UNI1	You consider it important that every person in the world is treated equally. You believe that everyone should have the same opportunities in life.	5.64	0.81
UNI2	It is important for you to listen to people who are different from you. Even if you do not agree with them, you still want to understand them.	5.40	0.88
UNI3	You firmly believe that people should take care of nature. Taking care of the environment is important to you.	5.56	0.79
Personal Norm (PN) (1 = 'Not at all'; 5 = 'Strongly')			
PN1	You firmly believe that people should take care of nature. Taking care of the environment is important to you.	2.72	1.17
PN2	I feel morally obliged to buy food products with worker-friendly labels.	2.80	1.21
Self-identity (ID) (1 = 'Not at all'; 5 = 'Strongly')			
IDENT1	To what extent do you see yourself as a consumer reflecting on the social consequences of your purchasing decisions?	3.55	1.02
IDENT2	To what extent do you consider yourself a consumer who considers human working conditions when shopping?	3.35	1.09
Awareness of consequences (AC) (1 = 'Totally disagree'; 5 = 'Totally agree')			
AC1	By buying F&V products with worker-friendly labels I can contribute to improving the income of farmers and farm workers.	3.96	0.97
AC2	Buying F&V food products with worker-friendly labels is not an effective action to improve the living conditions of farmers and farm workers [reverse coding]	3.16	1.33
AC3	Every purchase of ethical products contributes to making the market fairer	3.70	1.05
Ascription of responsibility (AR) (1 = 'Totally disagree'; 5 = 'Totally agree')			
AR1	Those who buy the products, i.e. people like me, are responsible for doing something against the exploitation of farm workers	3.74	1.11
AR2	All people in Italy, including me, are responsible for doing something to improve the living conditions of agricultural workers	3.85	1.08