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Consuming Rural Territories through Food – A Segmentation Analysis Based on the Food Choices of Urban Specialty Stores' Customers

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ABSTRACT

The increasing interest of consumers in rural provenance food products is known to meet concerns regarding authenticity, health, safety, and sustainability and to be based on knowledge and familiarity. Based on the results of a survey to 1553 customers of 24 urban specialty shops, located in three Portuguese cities, this study aims at identifying different segments of consumers of rural provenance foods according to the criteria they value when acquiring and consuming those products. From a hierarchical cluster analysis based on shopping preferences, three clusters were identified: *The Influenced*, choosing the products mainly by recommendation; *The Provenance Seekers*, privileging provenance and related qualities; and *The All-embracers*, considering a multiplicity of criteria when shopping. These clusters differ in terms of socio-demographic profiles, products bought, consumption behavior, familiarity with rural areas, and images of food products and territories of provenance. Results show the mutual influence of these dimensions on food preferences.

KEYWORDS

Food shopping criteria; hierarchical cluster analysis; rural provenance food products' consumers; segmentation; customers of urban specialty shops

Introduction

There is an ongoing shift in contemporary consumers' preferences toward provenance foods whose features and quality connect with perceptions of authenticity, health, safety, and sustainability (e.g., Figueiredo et al., 2022; Gangjee, 2017; Mapes, 2020; Truninger & Sobral, 2011). These preferences are being shaped by social discourses and driven by increasingly disseminated socio-political motivations regarding environmental protection, sustainable production, and responsible consumption alongside healthy choices and lifestyles (e.g., Birch et al., 2018; Figueiredo et al., 2022; Hatanaka, 2020). Concerns and familiarity with specific socio-economic contexts are also important in shaping and promoting this interest, especially in Southern Europe where recent dynamics of de-ruralization contribute to lingering social, familiar, and emotional ties with rural territories and respective socio-cultural imaginaries and practices (Figueiredo et al., 2022; Truninger, 2014). These are also contexts featuring a wide range of food quality policies anchored in territorial and social conventions and involving several stakeholders throughout food supply chains.

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One of the stakeholders that have gained traction in recent years are small-medium retailers such as urban specialty shops selling rural provenance foods (Silva et al., 2021). These shops and their connections to the rural can be considered as part of a wider movement that has spawned academic interest over labels such as local food, Alternative Food Networks, Short Food Supply Chains, and other forms of production and distribution networks that have sought to counter the dominance of mass-produced foods (e.g., Crawford et al., 2018; Fernández-Ferrín et al., 2018; Kneafsey et al., 2017). However, the specific role of those shops in promoting rural-urban linkages and fostering the production, distribution, and consumption of rural provenance food products, although recently increasingly acknowledged, has been scarcely addressed (Figueiredo et al., 2022; Forte et al., 2022; Pétursson, 2018; Silva et al., 2021). On the one hand, these shops act as showcases for rural food products, territories of provenance, and local or regional cultural identities and ways of doing, fostering consumers' interest and shaping their practices. On the other hand, they tend to support small to medium-scale productions and producers that otherwise would face more challenges and logistic and financial barriers to commercialize their products (Silva et al., 2021).

Despite the extensive literature on food consumption and shopping determinants, the preference for rural provenance, traditional, nationally, or locally produced food products is a less studied topic, especially when considering – as this paper does – the differences between groups regarding the analyzed dimensions. Departing from the analysis urban specialty shops' customers (and consumers) of rural provenance foods, the present paper aim is twofold: on the one hand, to identify different segments of customers based on the criteria they value when acquiring those products and, on the other hand, to characterize these segments considering their similarities and differences regarding their images on the food products and rural territories of provenance; the type of products acquired and their regions of origin; consumption practices and relationship with the shop; familiarity with rural territories and socio-demographic profile, to understand the influence of these dimensions on consumers' rural provenance food preferences. The segmentation is based on a hierarchical cluster analysis (with Ward's method and the Squared Euclidean Distance) undertaken on data collected through a survey directed to a sample of 1553 customers of 24 urban specialty shops located in three Portuguese cities: Aveiro, Lisbon, and Porto. The hierarchical cluster analysis was based on the criteria customers value when acquiring rural provenance food products. The three clusters identified – *The Influenced*, *The Provenance Seekers*, and *The All-embracers* – reflect relevant differences considering the dimensions analyzed and their mutual influence on customers' food preferences, contributing to a deeper understanding of consumption practices and motivations of rural provenance food products. Results provide important contributions to rural provenance food marketing research, particularly for urban specialty shops and other food retailers to better target different types of customer in their promotion and selling strategies, by highlighting the strong connections between rural provenance food consumption and the role of familiarity with rural territories and products in determining consumers' preferences.

Literature review – shopping and consumption criteria of rural provenance food products

The present article draws on the concept of rural provenance food products (Figueiredo, 2021; Figueiredo et al., 2022; Forte et al., 2022). This term was proposed as an overarching construct of the manifold definitions of non-intensive agri-industrial food production, including traditional, local, regional, organic, *terroir*, of special quality, or authentic foodstuffs. Underlying all these products and definitions lies their strong connection with the biophysical and natural resources of a given territory paired with the cultural legacies and values embedded in the modes of food production and transformation (Figueiredo et al., 2022; Fonte, 2008; Kneafsey et al., 2017; Montanari, 2006).

By taking as a general premise that these products' utter distinctiveness is based on their national, regional and local origin's natural and cultural resources, the construct of rural provenance foods is wide enough to assure a common denominator for origin foods whose labels and meanings may vary

across cultural contexts guiding consumers' choices (DeSoucey, 2010; Figueiredo et al., 2022; Forte et al., 2022) and meeting several consumers' values (Schwartz, 1991), alongside emotional attachments (Pícha et al., 2018; Tsakiridou et al., 2009). These attributes relate to consumer demands for a reliable origin and authenticity (Mapes, 2020; Truninger & Sobral, 2011) ensuring traceability, an increasingly valued attribute in food preferences that guarantees the consumer regarding raw materials and production processes (Kehagia et al., 2007; Madaleno et al., 2019). The local embeddedness of products and supply chains, especially when using sustainable farming and food production (Crawford et al., 2018; Reid & Rout, 2016) and the close relation to nature (Murdoch et al., 2000) are essential parts of the perception of higher quality and genuineness.

Perceptions of food quality are shaped by political, and economic contexts, forces and discourses that, at the same time, shape the provenance foods themselves (DeSoucey, 2010; Tellstrom et al., 2006), namely – although not exclusively – through certification schemes such as the European Union (EU) food quality labels (Grunert & Aachman, 2016; Tregear & Giraud, 2011). Despite other characteristics and some paradoxes associated with those schemes (as discussed, for example, in DeSoucey, 2010; Gangjee, 2017; Grunert & Aachman, 2016), quality labels are designed to protect food producers, territories of origin, as well as to foster the interest and support consumers' preferences by closing the gap between them and those producers, products, and territories (e.g., Figueiredo, 2021; Fonte, 2008).

Be the case as it may, it has been argued that consumers can more easily recall a relation between quality and origin (officially certified or not) than between a brand and quality (e.g., Guerrero et al., 2009). This suggests that information about provenance, by itself, may affect consumers in affective, instrumental, and normative ways (Tellstrom et al., 2006). Specifically, it provides cues for products' quality, authenticity, and trustworthiness, also giving them and their consumption practices a symbolic and emotional value, such as social status or self-image (e.g., Bryla, 2015; Mapes, 2018, 2020). In the same vein, even though price is generally perceived more as a barrier than an enabler factor, consumers appear to be inclined to pay a premium price for locally produced and traditional foods, perceived as superior in quality (e.g., Castelló & Mihelj, 2018). This predisposition may reflect the idea of 'good money for value' (instead of the so-called 'good value for money,' Arsil et al., 2018) and their increasing embodiment of a 'positional good,' signaling a rank in the social hierarchy (Lo Monaco & Bonetto, 2019) or the belonging to an 'elite' (Mapes, 2018).

Provenance foods are often related to a higher perception of safety and naturalness (Guerrero et al., 2009; Kehagia et al., 2007) and to a closer linkage to particular and familiar territories, both acting as strong drivers for its consumption. Food consumption is increasingly driven by socio-political motivations, concerns, and values, as already suggested, many related to environmental protection, farming sustainability, and social equity. Seen through the lens of the basic human values theory (Schwartz, 1991), rural provenance foods choice appears to draw on the value of universalism expressed by the protection of others and nature's well-being and, also, on benevolence reflected in the concern with one's own and personal relations' well-being as it may be seen in the purchase of organic, local and slow food (Bianchi & Mortimer, 2015), being motivated again by health concerns (e.g., Arsil et al., 2018; Guerrero et al., 2009), safety and trust (e.g., Guerrero et al., 2009; Paddock, 2014), as well as by environmental and social concerns (e.g., Birch et al., 2018; Casini et al., 2016; Kneafsey et al., 2017) both with wider contexts and with local communities (e.g., Madaleno et al., 2019).

In the same vein, the influence of normative elements, such as moral and ethnocentric norms, was also found in many consumers of local and specialty foods (Bianchi & Mortimer, 2015; Fernández-Ferrín et al., 2018). Ethnocentric consumption is influenced by political, economic, and also health values and concerns, as shown by the recent pandemic effects (Pekkanen & Penttilä, 2021). Recalling the different elements of consumption values theory (Schwartz, 1991) this endogenous preference may meet also emotional functions, such as a nostalgic 'yearning for the past' or patriotic feelings of belonging (Barham, 2003; Castelló & Mihelj, 2018). Recent research is reframing the preference of consumers for what is local, familiar, and close as a matter of helping behavior (Skallerud & Wien, 2019) and guided by social concerns, such as the desire to contribute to the economy and agricultural

production of one's national context, supporting local communities, farmers, producers, fostering more job opportunities and contributing to rural development (e.g., Casini et al., 2016; Figueiredo et al., 2022; Reid & Rout, 2016). As Pekkanen & Penttilä (2020) refer, this may be related to what has been called responsible or ethical consumption, more influenced by environmental and social concerns than by nationalist rhetoric. As Hatanaka (2020) and Pekkanen and Penttilä (2020) point out, ethical consumption is connected to the idea of consumers as knowledgeable citizens that make food choices partially based on the "invisible others that help feed us" (Carolan, 2018, p. 148). According to Hatanaka (2020), the values related to both ethnocentric and ethical consumption have contributed to put rural provenance foods in the spotlight (Hatanaka, 2020).

Familiarity – which is often related to consumers' ethnocentrism (Fernández-Ferrín et al., 2018; Figueiredo et al., 2022) – was found to be associated with higher knowledge and more frequent consumption of these foodstuffs (Figueiredo et al., 2022; Reid & Rout, 2016). Familiarity with rural provenance food products comes in many forms, spanning from recognizing the products, raw materials, and ways of production to being knowledgeable of and connected to the products territories of provenance (Figueiredo et al., 2022; Seo et al., 2013). A first level of familiarity with food is related to the physical and sensorial attributes of the products, especially visual elements, labels, and packaging (Kehagia et al., 2007; Tellstrom et al., 2006). In the specific case of rural provenance foods, however, familiarity cannot be conceived merely as a visual recollection or knowledge of a given product or brand.

Considering that food is embedded in a social and cultural context (Montanari, 2006), provenance food, in particular, anchors in specific territories, knowledge, and values that one contacts while growing up, structuring one's habitus (Figueiredo et al., 2022; Jang & Lee, 2019), promoting both a sensorial and symbolic familiarity (Pereira et al., 2015; Truninger, 2014), that ranges from appreciating specific flavors and scents to recognizing certain ways of cooking and preparing foodstuffs (Jang & Lee, 2019). The integration of these foodstuffs in shared practices and familiar reference points translates into a symbolic and social organization, fostering bonds between those who share them and between people and the places of food provenance (Lo Monaco & Bonetto, 2019; Seo et al., 2013; Truninger, 2014), forging taste, preferences and dietary habits (Figueiredo et al., 2022). Although risk avoidance and disgust may be also involved in consumers' preferences for familiar products and brands (e.g., Donato, 2021; Madaleno et al., 2019), as it may induce neophobia-related feelings toward unfamiliar foods (e.g., Kim et al., 2009; Madaleno et al., 2019) especially in exotic and non-familiar contexts, those aspects seem less relevant regarding rural provenance food products. As Memery et al. (2015) refer familiarity and knowledge of food products and their territories of origin also feature concerns toward rural communities' development and well-being, as well as motivate specific, generally positive, representations regarding those communities. As Figueiredo et al. (2022) found, the salience of consumption of rural provenance food products amongst the consumers with stronger rural ties is connected with positive images regarding Portuguese rural territories. These shape consumers' motivations not only for acquiring Portuguese rural products but to support Portuguese agriculture and rural communities. Also, Eusébio et al. (2017) and Soares da Silva et al. (2016) conclude that positive images of rural territories impact the consumption of local foods, especially from those visiting those territories more often and engaging in several activities in the countryside.

Familiarity thus unfolds at different levels of analysis (national, regional, and local) and different group's identities, belonging, and interpersonal relations (e.g., Capellini et al., 2015; Figueiredo et al., 2022; Paddock, 2014), at the same time reflecting the socially stratified nature of food consumption as exemplified by Mapes (2020). Rural provenance products do not fit squarely a so-called cosmopolitan or elite taste (Mapes, 2020) as it is often represented by consumers (as well as by other agents within the food supply chains) as related to peasant, pre-modern, and pre-capitalist societies (Figueiredo, 2021; Figueiredo et al., 2022). These connections and images of rural food products and on their territories of origin are arguably stronger in Southern European countries in which the more recent dynamics of de-ruralization have promoted long-lasting connections with rural territories and their products (Figueiredo et al., 2022; Truninger, 2014) that are still quite visible and dynamic across

various groups of the population (Figueiredo et al., 2022; Ramos & Truninger, 2021). These connections promote complex networks between people and territories and are linked to small-scale production and specific social contexts even if a large part of the population currently lives in urban contexts. The complexity of the connections and their transformation over time contributed to shaping familiarity and knowledge, as well as preference for rural provenance food products (Figueiredo et al., 2022), also redefining rural identities and promoting (as Reid & Rout, 2016, refer) increasing interest in rurality and its manifestations, including food.

How rural provenance products are perceived and the motivations that make them appealing to consumers are also, as suggested before, modeled by the promotional strategies and marketing devices employed to portray them. Forte et al. (2022), pp. – in a study with a large sample of physical and social network-based promotional materials of rural provenance foods – found that provenance is indeed a keystone for their marketing, together with authenticity, superior quality, distinctiveness, rootedness, sustainability, and health, clearly matching the consumers' preference criteria for this type of foods. In this vein, by bringing the food products and, through their embedded features, their places of provenance into urban contexts, specialty food shops play a relevant role in the promotion of those products. By bringing the food products closer – and making them available – to the urban consumers, these shops also promote experiential and informational familiarity, contributing to shaping consumers' preferences and food selection criteria (Silva et al., 2021).

The outreach strategies employed by these stores tend to be customized, investing in the products' promotion to different consumer segments and in emotional attachments between consumers, stores, products, and territories of provenance (Forte et al., 2022; Pétursson, 2018). All of these are potentiated through the emergence and increasing use of digital media, particularly social media (Simeone & Scarpatò, 2020), marketing devices increasingly replacing traditional word-of-mouth and prone to establish closer and familiar relationships with customers (Lhadari et al., 2020). This 'digital word-of-mouth' can indeed create a deeper awareness of the products as well as motivate discussions and exchanges between 'social consumers,' who tend to be more open to more information (Simeone & Scarpatò, 2020).

Methodology

Data collection

To identify and characterize the different segments of customers of urban specialty shops selling rural provenance food products, a questionnaire was applied between October 2020 and June 2021 to 1553 clients of 24 shops located in the cities of Aveiro, Lisbon, and Porto, in Portugal. These cities were selected based on their number of residents and visitors. Lisbon and Porto are the country's largest cities in terms of number of inhabitants and ranked, respectively, 63rd and 96th in the most visited cities in the world (Euromonitor International, 2019). Aveiro is a medium-sized city, according to Portuguese standards and was chosen for comparison purposes, as, although it experienced an increase in the number of tourists, these are mainly one-day visitors. All the three cities have experienced an increase in the number of specialty food stores, during the last decade.

The 24 shops were randomly selected (using a random number generator) based on a hierarchical cluster analysis resulting from data collected through a survey targeting specialty food shops owners and managers in each city (N = 113). Three clusters of shops were identified following the hierarchical cluster analysis based on the criteria of selling Portuguese rural provenance food products: *The Wine Focused* (including shops mainly selling wine and other beverages), *The Rural Provenance Focused* (integrating shops selling mostly products of rural provenance) and *The Generalist* (including stores selling a diversity of products from different provenances) (see, Silva et al., 2021, for a thorough characterization of these clusters of shops). From these, and also considering the city of location, the 24 shops were then selected. The distribution of these shops by clusters is as follows: 4 shops from *The Wine Focused* cluster; 11 from *The Rural Provenance Focused* and 9 from *The Generalist*. Regarding

the city of location: 5 shops are located in Aveiro, 9 in Lisbon and 10 in Porto. The selection of the customers at each of the 24 shops followed convenience sample procedures. We visited each shop in different days (week days and Saturdays) at different time periods, to include a greater diversity of customers.

The questionnaire was prepared both in English and in Portuguese (based on, among others, Birch et al., 2018; Casini et al., 2016; Fernández-Ferrín et al., 2018; Gangjee, 2017; Guerrero et al., 2009; Kneafsey et al., 2017; Soares da Silva et al., 2016) and structured to address respondents' socio-demographic profile, the selection criteria regarding the purchase of rural provenance food products, the products acquired at the shop on the survey date, regions of provenance, frequency of consumption, connections with rural territories, as well as the representations on those territories and the food products. A pilot test with some customers (10) from shops located in Aveiro and Porto was conducted, resulting in the fine-tuning of language and the introduction of some alternative responses in the close-ended questions. Data was collected mainly through face-to-face questionnaires at the shops ($N = 1475$ –95%) and, additionally, through an online version disseminated through institutional networks and by the considered urban specialty stores in their social media pages ($N = 78$ –5%).

Data analysis

To segment the customers of the 24 shops regarding the reasons to purchase and consume Portuguese rural provenance food products, a hierarchical cluster analysis, using Ward's method and the Squared Euclidean Distance, was undertaken. In order to segment the customers, their answers to the Likert-scale question "what do you usually value when you buy traditional food products and beverages of Portuguese rural origin? (from 1 – less important to 5 – more important)" were considered. The question comprises 20 items (reasons) and the respondents had to indicate its relevance when buying Portuguese rural provenance food products. As shown in Table 1, those items encompass a variety of motives, from the sensorial characteristics of the products (e.g., taste, appearance), the previous knowledge on the products or brands, their national and local production, the environmental impact of their production, to advertisement and recommendations.

Based on the analysis of the agglomeration schedule and of the dendrogram, a three-cluster solution was obtained. Tests were used to compare the clusters regarding qualitative variables (e.g., sociodemographic characteristics; familiarity with rural areas; the type of products bought at the shop and their regions of origin; and images of rural territories and rural provenance food products. Since the assumptions of ANOVA did not meet, Kruskal-Wallis test was used to compare the clusters regarding the relevance attributed to the set of reasons to acquire and prefer the products. The analysis was performed using SPSS (*Statistical Package for Social Sciences*) software, version 25 (IBM, USA).

Findings

Sample profile

Overall, when choosing and buying rural provenance food products, respondents mainly value sensorial features, especially taste, freshness, and appearance; Portuguese, local and rural provenance; shop characteristics, such as the fair price of the products, the trust in the store, and in its specialized customer services; as well as features related to social concerns, as the support for Portuguese agriculture and rural communities (Table 1).

The majority of the respondents are frequent consumers of Portuguese rural provenance food, almost half of them being regular customers of the shop in which they were surveyed and a few participating in activities promoted by the store (such as wine and/ or food tastings, thematic dinners, meeting the producers; Table 2). A large proportion of respondents bought wine and other beverages, followed by cheese and other milk products, cured meat and other animal-based

Table 1. Cluster identified according the reasons to buy Portuguese rural provenance food products.

	Clusters				Kruskal-Wallis	
	Total (N = 1452, 100%) Mean	Cluster 1 The Influenced (N = 1022, 70.4%) Mean	Cluster 2 The Provenance Seekers (N = 226, 15.6%) Mean	Cluster 3 The All- embracers (N = 204, 14.0%) Mean	Value	p-value
Reasons to buy Portuguese rural provenance food products*						
That they are produced in Portugal	4.23	4.09	4.52	4.63	93.092	0.000
If they look good	4.12	4.09	3.86	4.56	67.173	0.000
That they are local	4.12	4.00	4.19	4.65	95.974	0.000
Having a fair price	4.20	4.05	4.39	4.73	109.058	0.000
If they taste better	4.33	4.16	4.60	4.89	174.438	0.000
If they are fresh produce	4.17	4.06	4.08	4.82	128.688	0.000
If they are officially certified (PDO, IGP, Organic)	3.48	3.39	3.15	4.33	133.835	0.000
To know the producers	3.47	3.37	3.17	4.29	138.433	0.000
To know the products' brands	3.51	3.43	3.13	4.32	150.933	0.000
To know the products already	3.64	3.55	3.31	4.48	162.648	0.000
If they have been recommended by friends and/or family	3.80	3.79	3.20	4.51	183.008	0.000
If they are small-scale produced	3.84	3.69	3.85	4.57	128.127	0.000
To be produced in Portuguese rural areas	3.95	3.69	4.45	4.67	226.905	0.000
The fact that I can buy the products in my residence area	3.62	3.33	4.29	4.31	189.049	0.000
Being advertised on mass media/ social media	3.23	3.49	1.80	3.50	293.388	0.000
That they are healthier	3.92	3.76	4.05	4.54	107.101	0.000
To trust in the store and in its specialized customer service	4.01	3.84	4.35	4.48	100.396	0.000
To support Portuguese agriculture and rural areas	4.09	3.87	4.54	4.67	179.917	0.000
Their nutritional information	3.81	3.78	3.37	4.50	120.944	0.000
If their production carries a low environmental impact	3.95	3.76	4.14	4.65	138.715	0.000

Notes: * Items classified in a five-point type Likert scale from 1 – “less important” to 5 – “more important”
 Values in bold correspond to the higher values when statistically significant differences exist
 Values in bold and italic correspond to the second higher values when statistically significant differences exist

products, and vegetables, fruits, herbs and similar. The regions of provenance of the products bought are mainly the North, Center, and Alentejo, all prominent production areas of these foods (Table 3).

In general, respondents have a very positive image of Portuguese rural territories, often associating them with tranquility, appreciation, and well-being, as well as with the environment and natural elements (Table 4). Images of Portuguese rural provenance food products are more diffuse, although their general quality stands out together with their sensorial characteristics (Table 5).

Interestingly, almost half of the sample has relatives living in Portuguese rural areas and more than half of the respondents have visited Portuguese rural territories in the last three years engaging in a wide range of activities, including tasting local gastronomy and wines and buying local food products (Table 6).

In terms of the socio-demographic profile, the analyzed sample comprises a slightly higher percentage of females, a greater proportion of Portuguese customers, married or cohabiting individuals, of people in professional active age, employed, with higher education levels and with a net monthly household income between less than 1000€ (42.5%) and 2200€ (37.4%; Table 7). These income levels may be considered slightly lower than the average salary per household in Portugal, as evinced by the recent study of Ferreira et al. (2021), suggesting the relevance of the perception of the products' fair price amongst the preference determinants, as

Table 2. Cluster profile regarding consumption behavior toward Portuguese rural provenance food products.

Consumption behavior**	Clusters					Chi-square test	
	Total		Cluster 1	Cluster 2	Cluster 3	Value	p-value
	N	%	The Influenced (N = 1022, 70.4%) %*	The Provenance Seekers (N = 226, 15.6%) %*	The All-embracers (N = 204, 14.0%) %*		
Frequent consumption of Portuguese rural food products	1081	74.4	71.5	86.5	79.2	24.306	0.000
Regular customer of the store	718	49.7	45.9	66.4	49.8	30.941	0.000
Participation in activities promoted by the store	69	9.7	5.8	16.3	18.0	23.498	0.000

Notes:* Percentage in column

Values in bold correspond to the highest values when statistically significant differences exist

** Only the values corresponding to “yes” are presented

discussed below and, somehow, contradicting the findings of Mapes (2018) on the ‘elitist’ character of these products.

Cluster profiles

Three different clusters emerged from the hierarchical cluster analysis performed based on the reasons to buy Portuguese rural provenance food products (Table 1). Significant statistical differences were found among the three clusters regarding consumption behavior (Table 2), type of products acquired and regions of provenance (Table 3), images of Portuguese rural territories (Table 4) and food products (Table 5), familiarity with rural areas (Table 6) and socio-demographic profile (Table 7).

Cluster 1 – *The Influenced* – is the largest one (N = 1022, 70.4%), including respondents who, when choosing rural provenance food products, tend to rely on recommendations from family and friends, advertisements on mass and/ or social media, and the nutritional information. Previous knowledge of the food products, their brands and producers, together with quality labels (such as PDO, IGP and Organic) and products’ appearance are also important criteria for this group. The respondents included in this cluster are more likely to buy vegetables, fruits, and similar, especially from the Northern region of Portugal. Although the majority of *The Influenced* respondents tend to be frequent consumers of Portuguese rural provenance foods, they are less likely – when compared to the other two clusters (especially the second one) – to consume these products, to be regular customers of the shop where they are surveyed and to engage in the activities promoted by the store. This cluster is divided regarding the representations of Portuguese rural areas. On the one hand, *The Influenced* are the ones more likely to represent these areas in a more negative light, as abandoned, isolated, and aged. On the other hand, they are also more likely to associate rural areas with positive aspects, such as tranquility and well-being, as well as – similarly to the third cluster – roots and nostalgia. Portuguese rural provenance food products are portrayed by this group mainly as artisanal and traditional, based on experience and know-how. *The Influenced* are more likely to have fewer connections (familiar and otherwise) with rural territories and to have visited them in the last three years. However, when visiting Portuguese rural areas, they tend to engage, more than the other two clusters, in cultural visits, nature tourism activities, and acquire more handicraft products. These respondents are more likely to be married or single, and have lower literacy and income levels. Interestingly, this group is more likely to include Non-Portuguese respondents which may help explain their fewer connections with national rural territories, as well as their greater reliance on recommendations when choosing rural provenance food products.

The Provenance Seekers formed Cluster 2 (N = 226, 15.6%), grouping respondents that are more likely to value provenance-related features (Portuguese, rural and local) when buying food products.

Table 3. Cluster profile regarding the type of products bought and regions of provenance.

	Clusters						Chi-square test	
	Total		Cluster 1	Cluster 2	Cluster 3	Value	p-value	
Products bought	N	%	The Influenced (N = 1022, 70.4%) %*	The Provenance Seekers (N = 226, 15.6%) %*	The All- embracers (N = 204, 14.0%) %*			
Type of products**								
Vegetables, fruits herbs and derivatives	280	19.5	21.1	19.3	11.3	10.397	0.006	
Olive oil	94	6.5	6.5	8.1	5.0	1.691	0.429	
Honey, jams and preserves	97	6.8	5.9	6.3	11.4	8.067	0.018	
Cheese and other milk derivatives	300	20.9	18.5	26.0	27.2	12.013	0.002	
Wine and other beverages	438	30.5	29.2	36.3	30.2	4.324	0.115	
Meat	15	1.0	0.6	3.6	0.5	a)		
Cured meat and other animal-based products	296	20.6	21.5	17.0	19.8	2.355	0.308	
Bread and cereal products	148	10.3	11.3	8.5	7.4	3.591	0.166	
Sweets	167	11.6	11.3	13.5	11.4	0.864	0.649	
Hygiene, cosmetics and similar products	26	1.8	1.8	1.8	2.0	a)		
Crafts and similar products	32	2.2	1.6	0.9	6.9	a)		
Regions of origin – NUTS II								
<i>North</i>	754	55.0	60.2	46.9	36.0	43.476	0.000	
<i>Center</i>	544	39.7	38.1	35.2	52.4	15.418	0.000	
<i>Lisbon</i>	47	3.4	3.1	4.1	4.2	0.869	0.648	
<i>Alentejo</i>	217	15.8	15.3	21.4	12.7	6.215	0.045	
<i>Algarve</i>	9	0.7	0.6	0.5	1.1	a)		
<i>Azores</i>	85	6.2	4.3	14.3	7.9	29.508	0.000	
<i>Madeira</i>	10	0.7	0.6	2.0	0.0	a)		

Notes: * Percentage in column

Values in bold correspond to the highest values when statistically significant differences exist

Values in bold and italic correspond to the second highest values when statistically significant differences exist

** Only the values corresponding to “yes” are presented

a) The assumption of chi-square test was not observed

This group also tends to value the sensorial features of the products (such as flavor and the cosmetic appearance of foods that can be translated through freshness) and to base their food preferences on health, environmental and social concerns and values, therefore valuing the healthier character of the products, the small-scale nature of the production, its lower environmental impact and the support for Portuguese agriculture and rural areas. The products’ fair price, the trust in the shop and its specialized customer service, and the ability to access the products in their residency area are also important criteria for this group, particularly when compared to *The Influenced*. These characteristics may explain the fact that *The Provenance Seekers* are more likely to be regular customers of the shop and frequent consumers of Portuguese rural provenance foods. Respondents in this group tended to buy more often cheese and other milk derivatives, mainly from the Azores and Alentejo regions. Compared with the other two clusters, *The Provenance Seekers* are more likely to represent Portuguese rural areas as the places for farming and agricultural activities, for producing specific products with particular characteristics, as well as for environmental and natural resources conservation. Coherently, their image of Portuguese rural provenance food products is significantly more related to specific products, especially with cheese and other milk products and vegetables, cereals and fruits, truly portraying rural territories as places of food provenance. *The Provenance Seekers* are more likely (although sharing this feature with the respondents from the third cluster) to have family connections with Portuguese rural territories and to have visited rural areas in the last three years. Although statistically significant differences among all the clusters could not be confirmed, this cluster tends to taste, more than the other two groups, local gastronomy and wines during the visits to rural

Table 4. Cluster profile regarding the images on Portuguese rural areas.

Images on Portuguese rural areas**	Clusters					Chi-square test	
	Total		Cluster 1	Cluster 2	Cluster 3	Value	p-value
	N	%	The Influenced (N = 1022, 70.4%) %*	The Provenance Seekers (N = 226, 15.6%) %*	The All- embracers (N = 204, 14.0%) %*		
Abandonment, isolation and ageing	239	16.5	18.8	11.9	9.9	13.861	0.001
Gaze, tranquility and well-being	542	37.4	38.9	29.6	38.4	6.856	0.032
Farming	255	17.6	17.0	23.5	13.8	7.588	0.023
Places, villages and ways of life	190	13.1	13.5	11.9	12.3	0.529	0.758
Food products and characteristics	155	10.7	7.9	20.8	13.3	33.755	0.000
Undeveloped and problematic	79	5.4	5.4	6.2	4.9	0.359	0.836
Authentic, traditional and unique	211	14.6	14.8	16.4	11.3	2.343	0.310
Roots and nostalgia	241	16.6	17.4	10.6	19.2	7.344	0.025
Growth and diversity	46	3.2	3.1	2.7	3.9	0.592	0.744
Environment and natural elements	441	30.4	27.5	35.8	38.9	14.113	0.001

Notes:* Percentage in column

Values in bold correspond to the highest values when statistically significant differences exist

Values in bold and italic correspond to the second higher values when statistically significant differences exist

** Only the values corresponding to “yes” are presented

territories. *The Provenance Seekers* are more likely to include more Portuguese, divorced and widowed individuals, employed, with higher education and income levels.

Finally, Cluster 3 – *The All-embracers* (N = 204, 14%) – gathers respondents valuing all the criteria related to food choice. Therefore, besides valuing all the dimensions that are privileged by the other two groups, they value them slightly more. For *The All-embracers*, marketing and familiarity with the products matter, as well as their Portuguese and rural provenance, their sensorial characteristics, their fair price, and the trust and relationship with the shops. In the same vein, features related to health, environmental and social concerns are also more evidenced by the respondents in this cluster. *The All-embracers* are more likely to participate in the activities promoted by the shops, but – compared with *The Provenance Seekers* – they are less likely to be regular customers and to frequently consume Portuguese rural provenance food products. The products bought by these respondents are – similarly to *The Provenance Seekers* – cheese and other milk derivatives, as well as jams, honey, and preserves. Compared with the other two clusters, *The All-embracers* are more likely to have bought food products from the Center region of Portugal, which is perhaps related to the more frequent preference for buying cheese and other milk derivatives. This group identifies rural areas with roots and nostalgia, an image they share with part of *The Influenced*. Similar to (although with greater relevance) to *The Provenance Seekers* this cluster also identifies Portuguese rural territories with the environment and natural elements. Contrary to the other two clusters, *The All-embracers* do not have a representation of rural food products that stands out, being these products portrayed more diffusely. Respondents in this group share similar, although slightly less significant, features with *The Provenance Seekers* regarding the connections with rural territories. Therefore, as in that cluster, they are more likely to have relatives in Portuguese rural areas and to have visited those areas in the last three years, carrying on several activities, including tasting local gastronomy and wines and buying local food products. Respondents in this cluster are more likely to be retired and unemployed, with higher education levels and a monthly household income between 1001€ and 2000€. As *The Provenance Seekers*, this cluster tends to include more Portuguese – which may also explain the significance of roots and nostalgia when representing the country’s rural areas – divorced and widowed respondents.

Table 5. Cluster profile regarding the images on Portuguese rural provenance food products.

	Clusters						Chi-square test	
	Total		Cluster 1	Cluster 2	Cluster 3	Value	p-value	
Images on Portuguese rural provenance food products**	N	%	The Influenced (N = 1022, 70.4%) %*	The Provenance Seekers (N = 226, 15.6%) %*	The All-embracers (N = 204, 14.0%) %*			
Vegetables, cereals and fruits	165	11.6	10.1	16.4	14.1	8.146	0.017	
Wine	141	9.9	9.7	8.9	12.1	1.382	0.501	
Honey, jams and sweets	71	5.0	4.2	5.1	9.1	8.482	0.014	
Cheese and other milk derivatives	242	17.0	14.9	26.2	18.2	16.177	0.000	
Meat and animal-based products	282	19.8	19.2	18.7	24.2	2.828	0.243	
Sensorial features of products	289	20.3	19.8	22.4	20.7	0.761	0.684	
Freshness	54	3.8	3.6	4.7	4.0	0.626	0.731	
Organic	54	3.8	3.7	4.7	3.5	0.533	0.766	
General Quality	299	21.0	21.4	18.2	22.2	1.270	0.530	
Price	10	0.7	0.5	1.9	0.5	a)		
National character, origin	21	1.5	1.3	3.3	0.5	a)		
Family/Nostalgia	71	5.0	5.3	5.1	3.5	1.039	0.595	
Trustworthy	31	2.2	2.8	0.5	1.0	a)		
Chemically free/ Healthy	62	4.4	5.0	2.3	3.5	3.280	0.194	
Nature/environment/sustainability	163	11.5	12.3	11.2	7.6	3.638	0.162	
Farmers and farming	104	7.3	8.2	4.2	6.1	4.744	0.093	
Selection/monotony	49	3.4	3.7	3.3	2.5	0.672	0.715	
Gastronomy and Cuisine	29	2.0	2.6	0.9	0.5	5.096	0.078	
Regional, local, from specific places	46	3.2	3.5	2.8	2.5	0.622	0.733	
Hand-made, traditional, experience and know-how	171	12.0	13.7	7.5	8.6	8.995	0.011	
Distinction and authenticity	172	12.1	13.1	7.9	11.6	4.433	0.109	

Notes:* Percentage in column

Values in bold correspond to the highest values when statistically significant differences exist

** Only the values corresponding to "yes" are presented

a) The assumption of chi-square test was not observed

Discussion and conclusions

This paper analyzed the determinants of rural provenance food shopping preferences, by identifying and characterizing different segments of customers of urban specialty shops located in three Portuguese cities (Aveiro, Lisbon, and Porto). Although there is a wide set of research on consumers' segmentation regarding food preferences, the motivations, and practices of consumers regarding rural provenance food products have been scarcely addressed. This study aimed to fill that gap and contribute, both from the theoretical and empirical standpoints to a deeper understanding of who the consumers of Portuguese rural provenance food products are and why they buy these products.

The empirical evidence analyzed here shows that those customers differ in terms of socio-demographic profiles, type of food products bought, images of these products and of their rural territories of provenance, and, more significantly, in their consumption behavior, relationship with the stores and degree of familiarity and connection with Portuguese rural areas. Additionally, our results show the mutual influence of the aforementioned dimensions in both shopping practices and food consumption preferences of rural provenance food products, in line with previous studies exploring food consumption determinants (e.g., Guerrero et al., 2009; Kehagia et al., 2007; Tellstrom et al., 2006; Tsakiridou et al., 2009).

Besides these differences, our results evinced some degree of diversity within each of those three clusters, particularly in relation to the criteria of preference for rural food products and images of rural areas. The latter is in line with the conclusions of Soares da Silva et al. (2016) in a study on the representations of the Portuguese population of rural territories that found an overlapping of images amongst different groups of respondents, as well as some internal contradictions. In our study, there

Table 6. Cluster profile regarding the familiarity and connections with Portuguese rural areas.

	Clusters					Chi-square test	
	Total		Cluster 1	Cluster 2	Cluster 3		
	N	%	The Influenced (N = 1022, 70.4%) %*	The Provenance Seekers (N = 226, 15.6%) %*	The All-embracers (N = 204, 14.0%) %*	Value	p-value
Familiarity with Portuguese rural areas**							
Relatives living in Portuguese Rural areas	719	49.7	45.9	62.1	54.9	21.83	0.000
Visited rural areas in the last 3 years	850	58.6	54.2	73.9	63.7	32.28	0.000
Type of activities carried out in rural areas visited***							
Cultural visits	546	64.1	67.0	57.1	60.8	6.139	0.046
Participate in cultural and/or religious events	386	45.3	45.1	41.7	50.8	2.471	0.291
Nature tourism activities	646	75.8	79.6	68.5	69.2	12.38	0.002
Taste local gastronomy and wines	709	83.2	83.9	84.5	78.5	2.515	0.284
Hunting and/or fishing	109	12.8	11.9	14.3	14.6	1.107	0.575
Buy food products	513	60.2	62.3	53.6	60.0	4.078	0.130
Buy handicraft	480	56.3	63.4	39.9	47.7	33.55	0.000
Participate in local traditional economic activities	212	24.9	23.5	26.2	29.2	2.064	0.356
Visiting relatives	365	42.8	41.2	50.0	40.8	4.387	0.112

Notes:* Percentage in column

Values in bold correspond to the highest values when statistically significant differences exist

Values in bold and italic correspond to the second higher values when statistically significant differences exist

** Only the values corresponding to “yes” are presented

*** Percentages were calculated based on the number of respondents who visited rural areas in the last 3 years

are some similarities between more than one cluster can be identified, suggesting that some aspects related to the representation of rural areas, food products, and food consumption preferences are transversal to or shared by more than one cluster, again in line with Soares da Silva et al. (2016), as well as with Eusebio et al. (2017) who also found that representations shape multiple consumptions of the countryside, including food products and gastronomy.

The internal diversity of the images of Portuguese rural areas is more evident in *The Influenced* group, which portrays these areas in, at least, a dual – and apparently contradictory – perspective. This cluster is more likely to represent Portuguese rural areas in a negative light, emphasizing their abandonment, isolation, and aging. However, it also emphasizes positive features, such as tranquility and well-being, as well as roots and nostalgia. The latter is shared with *The All-embracers* who, in turn, also share with *The Provenance Seekers* the portraying of rural areas as repositories of environment and natural elements. This reinforces the conclusion on the cross-cutting nature of some characteristics of the clusters identified, which – together with the internal diversity – corroborate the conclusions of Soares da Silva et al. (2016), especially regarding the internal – and sometimes contradictory – diversity demonstrated by *The Influenced*. Those authors emphasize that simultaneous images of the rural as deprived and idyllic are not fundamentally inconsistent since signs of rural decline and deprivation are often part of what people globally represent as ‘the rural’ and, consequently, they may be also part of the rural idyll (Soares da Silva et al., 2016).

Interestingly, the same internal diversity and cross-cutting character do not apply to the images respondents have of rural provenance food products. In fact, apart from *The All-embracers*, who tend to portray these products in a more diffuse way, emphasizing a wide variety of characteristics, both *The Influenced* and *The Provenance Seekers* have defined representations of the products. The first by highlighting their hand-made, traditional character, based on experience and know-how, and the second cluster by stressing specific products (such as vegetables and derivatives and cheese and other milk products) aligned with the dominant representation of rural areas as places for farming and

Table 7. Cluster profile regarding the socio-demographic characteristics of respondents.

Socio-demographic profile	Clusters						
	Total		Cluster 1	Cluster 2	Cluster 3	Chi-square test	
	N	%	<i>The Influenced</i> (N = 1022, 70.4%) %*	<i>The Provenance Seekers</i> (N = 226, 15.6%) %*	<i>The All-embracers</i> (N = 204, 14.0%) %*	Value	p-value
Gender							
Male	719	49.6	50.30	52.20	43.10	4.222	0.121
Female	731	50.4	49.70	47.80	56.90		
Age							
Less than 25	97	6.7	7.40	4.00	5.90		
[25–64]	1053	72.5	72.50	75.70	69.10	6.187	0.186
More than 64	302	20.8	20.10	20.40	25.00		
Marital status							
Single	400	27.7	28.70	25.00	25.60		
Married/Cohabiting	877	60.7	62.20	58.00	56.20	24.636	0.000
Divorced	98	6.8	4.80	10.70	12.30		
Widowed	70	4.8	4.30	6.30	5.90		
Education level							
Less than secondary education	424	29.4	31.50	23.00	26.20		
Secondary education	318	22.1	22.50	21.20	20.80	10.200	0.037
Higher education	699	48.5	46.00	55.90	53.00		
Economic status							
Employed	893	61.7	60.70	70.50	57.10		
Student	98	6.8	7.50	4.50	5.90		
Retired	330	22.8	22.60	20.10	26.60	15.989	0.043
Unemployed	99	6.8	7.20	3.10	9.40		
Other	27	1.9	2.10	1.80	1.00		
Nationality							
Portuguese	1092	75.4	73.1	82.7	78.8	10.671	0.005
Foreigner	357	24.6	26.9	17.3	21.2		
Monthly household income							
Less than 1000€	434	42.5	46.6	32.6	34.5		
[1001–2200€]	355	34.7	31.6	39.8	43.7	18.705	0.005
[2201–3000€]	81	7.9	7.3	9.4	9.2		
More than 3000€	152	14.9	14.4	18.2	12.7		

Notes: The higher values on each cluster are in bold.

producing specific productions. These two representations of the food products seem to mirror the overarching notion of rural provenance foods itself, as they – particularly the representation of *The Provenance Seekers* – reflect the strong intertwining between specific foods, their characteristics, ways of doing, and the biophysical and natural resources of the territories of provenance (in line with Figueiredo et al., 2022; Fonte, 2008; Kneafsey et al., 2017; Montanari, 2006).

Our results demonstrate that the images of the rural do not only seem to impact the representations of food products but also – and perhaps more significantly – their acquisition and consumption preferences and practices. Therefore, the clusters with more positive images of Portuguese rural areas (*The Provenance Seekers* and *The All-embracers*) are more likely to be regular customers of the urban specialty shops and to more frequently consume (Portuguese) rural provenance foods, as also highlighted by Figueiredo et al. (2022) and Guerrero et al. (2009). This pattern may also relate to experience, knowledge, and connections of both provenance territories and food products (as pointed out by Figueiredo et al., 2022; Madaleno et al., 2019; Seo et al., 2013). In the same vein, the more negative images of rural territories held by part of *The Influenced* respondents may contribute to explain their more sporadic shopping and consumption habits, as well as the features valued regarding rural provenance foodstuffs (also found in Figueiredo et al., 2022).

On the other hand, our findings demonstrate that rural areas and rural foods' representations seem to be influenced by the different levels of knowledge, familiarity, and connection that each cluster

holds with rural territories. It is also influenced by the most valued criteria for shopping and consuming those products (coherent with the findings of Figueiredo et al., 2022; Madaleno et al., 2019; Seo et al., 2013). Therefore, *The Provenance Seekers*, holding stronger family ties with Portuguese rural areas, are more likely to value the criteria related to rural provenance, agriculture, and rural development, as well as the lower environmental impact and the small-scale of the productions. Although this is also connected with their environment and social concerns (as put forth by Birch et al., 2018; Casini et al., 2016; Kneafsey et al., 2017; Skallerud & Wien, 2019), leading to a more responsible and ethical consumption (Pekkanen & Penttilä, 2020), it may also reflect ethnocentric values (Aprile et al., 2012; Bianchi & Mortimer, 2015; Fernández-Ferrín et al., 2018) and the desire to protect, promote and consume what is nationally and locally produced. Both ethical and ethnocentric values are related to emotional cues deriving from familiarity and other ties with those places and products (as demonstrated by Pícha et al., 2018; Tsakiridou et al., 2009). Amongst those cues, nostalgia and belonging stand out (Barham, 2003; Castelló & Mihelj, 2018), clearly related to family ties with territories and food products, as well as with particular memories of both (Barham, 2003; Castelló & Mihelj, 2018; Truninger, 2014). In our results, this is also visible in *The All-embracers* cluster, more likely to identify rural areas with roots and nostalgia and to value – similarly to *The Provenance Seekers* – shopping criteria of sensorial familiarity features of the food products (in line with Pereira et al., 2015; Truninger, 2014).

On the contrary, *The Influenced*, showing fewer connections with Portuguese rural areas, are more likely to be sporadic customers of the stores and to consume rural provenance food products less frequently than the other two clusters. It is worthwhile to note that this cluster is more likely to include Non-Portuguese respondents, which may help to explain the lower levels of familiarity with Portuguese rural areas and the apparent previous experience with the food products that make them rely more on recommendations and advertisements, and to value less the intrinsic and sensorial quality of these products, their Portuguese or local origin, as well as to express lower social and environmental concerns toward rural territories and agricultural productions. Furthermore, this group tends to include respondents with lower income levels which may be associated with the sporadic character of their shopping. This group differs from *The Provenance Seekers* and *The All-embracers* who value closer relationships with the shops, based on trustworthy connections, their specialized customer services, the fair price of the products, and their availability in the urban areas of residency. *The Provenance Seekers* include respondents with a higher monthly household income which may help to explain their higher likelihood to be regular customers of the shops and to consume rural provenance food products. This relationship tends to be nurtured by the shops, namely through marketing and promotional strategies and activities (Forte et al., 2022; Silva et al., 2021) in which *The All-embracers* are more likely to enroll.

All in all, our results strongly suggest that the ways through which social bonds affect consumer preferences vary between clusters. Consumers of the second and third clusters, especially from *The Provenance Seekers* group, appear to display a stronger autonomy in their ability to recognize quality attributes, implying that, through the incorporation of knowledge obtained in their social and cultural contexts, they acquired a more confident sense of taste, whether by familiarity with products or territories of origin (as also put forth by Lo Monaco & Bonetto, 2019; Reid & Rout, 2016; Seo et al., 2013; Truninger, 2014). By contrast, for consumers belonging to *The Influenced* cluster, these cues are more dependent on their present social networks. Overall, these results confirm that stronger familiarity and social bonds with rural contexts are powerful drivers of consumers' preferences for rural provenance foods. These seem to be particularly relevant in Southern European countries due to the long-lasting connections of people with rural territories and agriculture, as highlighted by Figueiredo et al. (2022) and Truninger (2014).

Our results provide important contributions, both theoretical and practical, to rural provenance food marketing research, a less study topic within the fields of food studies and food marketing, especially considering the segmentation of those products' choice motives and preferences. Particularly for urban specialty shops and other food retailers, the analysis of these aspects seems to

be helpful in better targeting different types of customers and their needs and wants, both in their promotion and marketing strategies and in their tactics to improve specialized customer services and advice, fundamental in the building of trustworthy relationships.

On the other hand, our results show that rural provenance products can be well disseminated to sporadic consumers, particularly through social media. This reinforces the central importance of this medium in contemporary food marketing, either strengthening the connection to those who are already familiar with the products and their origins or attracting new consumers. Increasingly addressed in current food marketing research, we found here that the role of this type of digital marketing benefits from transmitting notions of connection, proximity, familiarity, and quality – especially relevant in the case of traditional rural provenance foods. As consumers are the main targets of food marketing, these elements that characterize distinct segments of rural provenance foods consumption, may thus inform more tailored marketing approaches.

Despite the relevance of our results and the article's contributions, the findings are limited to just one country and a sample of customers of selected urban specialty shops located in just three cities in Portugal. Further research would be useful also considering regions other than Southern European, to better understand the analyzed dimensions, their mutual influence, and how more recent changes in rural societies, food production, and rural-urban connections may induce transformations in the motivations to purchase and consume rural provenance foods.

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Ethics approval statement

This work was approved by the University of Aveiro Ethics and Data Protection Board. All the participants in the survey were fully informed about the aims of the research and invited to give their informed consent before answering the questionnaire. This is in line with the General Regulation for Data Protection in force in the University of Aveiro and Portugal (Regulation (UE) n. 2016/679, 27 April 2016).

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