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ANALYTICAL PERSPECTIVE ON THE INTEREST OF SLOVAK CONSUMERS IN CERTIFIED ECOLOGICAL PRODUCTS

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ABSTRACT: People's interest in certified ecological products, environmental organisations, and issues related to environmental protection is a broadly conceived issue and is also a black box for green marketing – the paper deals with the analysis of Slovak consumer interest in certified products and environmental organisations. The aim is to observe and analyse the interest of consumers in accredited products and environmental organisations and to point out significant differences between the respondents' gender and place of residence on environmental behaviour. It is known from the research results that they register the given environmental certificates but do not know all of them simultaneously. The most famous for them is the ecological certificate Environmentally Suitable Product. The product marked in this way creates an impression of environmental friendliness and a guarantee of higher quality. Consumers register these products mainly from websites and the mass media. Gender differences in the expression of interest in environmental product certificates were confirmed, and differences in consumer purchasing decisions regarding certified environmental products in residence were not confirmed.

KEYWORDS: environmental labelling, consumer behaviour, certified products

Introduction

Consumers' behaviour and attitudes are changing significantly, even under the influence of the rapidly deteriorating state of the environment. Consumers' changing needs and expectations towards sustainability, together with a particular ecological awareness, can be observed worldwide. Within their eco-solutions, ecological brands and organisations should reflect on the local demands of consumers of the given region or country where they decide to implement their activities.

Ecolabeling is a globally applied concept that is part of broader environmental protection strategies and policies, sustainable development and social responsibility. Many existing ecological product labelling programs and systems belong to the numerous certified marks, aiming to raise consumer expectations when assessing specific product characteristics and parameters based on evaluation and control by an independent institution. For the consumer, they are important as sources of information about the product, especially when there is a lack of knowledge and personal experience with the purchased product, which is caused by the occasional nature of the purchase of the product, different conditions, the situation of past purchases and the inability to verify the declared characteristics of the product (Rusko & Kucháriková, 2007).

The aim and added value of the paper is the analysis of the interest of Slovak consumers in certified ecological products and environmental organisations and the pointing out significant differences. According to the authors, their knowledge is a key condition for green behaviour. From this point of view, the differentiation of consumer preferences regarding the place of residence and gender appears to be one of the most significant variables that complement the attributes of green Slovak consumers.

Literature review

Environmental issues are an increasingly topical issue of this time, especially in industrial production. Every organisation has a particular impact on the environment. There are several organisations worldwide for which environmental protection is the primary goal. These are environmental organisations, which include companies or civic associations that seek to publish reports of undesirable environmental changes and seek to prevent them. Environmental organisations are divided into local, global, regional, and national, or they can be understood as state or private (Taylor, 2014).

The most well-known environmental organisation is Greenpeace. The public perceives Greenpeace through various non-violent protests that serve as a warning of environmental damage. In addition, they carry out various scientific analyses, comment on laws, cooperate with various institutions, and provide information to the public (Greenpeace, 2022; Hartadi Jaya Nugraha et al., 2019). Another important organisation is the Friends of the Earth. It is a non-profit civic association that protects the environment, and nature in Slovakia, even in the European context, focusing primarily on two topics: minimising environmental pollution by waste and toxic substances (Friends of the Earth, 2022; Ekoforum, 2022). The Tree of Life Foundation is an ecological, non-governmental, voluntary, and non-profit organisation. The organisation pays attention to topics focused on the personal development of children and youth, especially the development of creativity, communication and presentation skills, talent, reading literacy, competent media handling, and critical thinking (Tree of Life Foundation, 2022). Another vital organisation in Slovakia is the Forest Protection Group VLK. It aims to protect the environment. As part of their activities, they participate in the protection of forests, the reduction of logging activities, the expansion of protected areas, and the support of predator protection (VLK, 2022). The World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) is an international non-governmental organisation promoting environmental protection, research, and restoration. The WWF aims to stop the degradation of the Earth's natural environment and build a future in which people live in harmony with nature, preserve the world's biodiversity, ensure the sustainable use of renewable natural resources, and promote pollution and wasteful consumption (WWF 2022).

An environmentally oriented organisation has a primary role in its activities to pay attention to the state of the environment to improve it, reduce the use of inputs from exhaustible sources, reduce waste production, promote recycling, and minimise potential environmental risks (Gates, 2021). In their publication, Belz and Peattie (2012) point out the possibilities of solving the complexity of sustainability problems through a systematic step-by-step approach. These steps include analysing socio-environmental priorities to complement conventional consumer research; integrating social, ethical and environmental values in the development of marketing strategy; a new consumer-oriented sustainability marketing mix; and an analysis of how marketing can contribute to the transformation to a more sustainable society. According to Ottman (2011), companies can lose their credibility by listing products and services that do not comply with environmental principles. The production of ecological effects is rising enormously.

One of the main reasons is that countries are adopting standards that significantly reduce environmental harm. The popularity of these products is also growing among consumers. The evolution of consumer trends in previ-

ous decades has led to continuous research to define a new segment called green or environmental consumers. The characteristic features of a green consumer are: Making a special effort to buy green products; Financial support of environmentally active groups; Knowing the importance of global warming; Concerns about air pollution and the ozone hole; Waste sorting for recycling (Do Paco & Raposo, 2009). Weisstein, Asgari, and Siew (2014) state that the environmental behaviour of consumers when buying more environmentally friendly products is influenced not only by their efforts to increase environmental protection but also by other factors such as the price of organic products, their quality, availability, or brand. An environmental consumer is a consumer who emphasises the protection of the environment when purchasing products and in all activities related to consuming these products. Generally, any environmentally friendly consumer is considered an environmental consumer (Shabani et al., 2013).

Regarding the environmental behaviour of consumers and the purchase of ecological products, it is appropriate to mention the environmental labelling of products. The Global Ecolabelling Network – GEN (2004) characterises the environmental labelling of goods, the so-called ecolabelling, as a type of product labelling whose mission is to provide the consumer with information on the relative environmental quality of products. The main participants in ecolabelling are government, industry and trade associations, retailers, businesses, and consumers. The priority objective of the eco-labelling of goods is to increase the demand and supply of such products and services by providing accurate and verifiable information on the environmental aspects of products. These products have a relatively low environmental impact, stimulating the potential for market-oriented continuous environmental improvement. Other goals of ecolabelling include environmental protection, which provides for promoting efficient management and ensuring the availability of renewable resources, promoting the efficient use of non-renewable resources, facilitating recycling, reuse, and reducing the production of consumer waste, etc.; Promoting environmentally sound innovation – a market incentive for innovative and progressive businesses that can fill market gaps or create a positive image among consumers by offering environmentally friendly products; Building environmental consumer awareness. Eco-labelling positively affects consumers' level of environmental awareness, as it provides reliable information on the environmental performance of products and the consequences of consumers' purchasing decisions. The Czech Environmental Information Agency CENIA (2019) states that only products or services that are more environmentally friendly and human health-friendly throughout the life cycle can be described as environmentally friendly. Still, their quality remains at a high level. These products are easily recognisable thanks to the environmental symbol, the so-called eco-label. According to Act

no. 469/2002 national eco-label is a label that, based on verification following the procedure established by this Act, certifies that the product in question meets above-standard requirements in terms of environmental protection compared to other products in the same product group. A national eco-label can only be a product with features that allow it to make a significant contribution to improving the environment concerning key environmental aspects throughout the product's life cycle.

A large number of different environmental labels are currently used in the world, which points to the environmental properties of products. In the research, we focused on those known among Slovak consumers. Major environmental brands include GOTS – Global Organic Textile Standard. There are no harmful substances in their products. The exciting thing is that she obtained a certificate, one of the most challenging certificates to get. With this certificate, the product becomes strictly monitored throughout the production phase of the development. Another important eco-label is the Environmentally Friendly Product. This label is obtained if the manufacturer meets specific criteria, such as the environmental impact of the products. The challenge is to minimise the adverse effects of production and consumption on the environment, climate, and health. The European Union also has an eco-label for organic products. To be awarded this certificate, the products must be certified by an official European regulation on organic farming. This certificate can be obtained by anyone who is a worker in the food industry, directly involved in agriculture or importing or producing food. The ISK quality mark is used in Slovakia. This brand distinguishes Slovak food from foreign food, supporting Slovak domestic food production. The brand is awarded only to products that meet above-standard quality parameters. Products such as coffee, bananas, tea, or cotton are called Fair Trade. The farmers who grow these crops care about the environment and receive sufficient payments, so the crops are sold at higher prices. Another vital certificate is the Forest Stewardship Council certificate, granted to the forest enterprise after checking the conditions or to the processing chain, i.e., a company that uses wood from a certified forest enterprise (Mobake, 2022).

Previous research on ecological products and environmental behaviour has pointed to several findings. For example, in the Czech Republic, customers' knowledge of ecological products is relatively high, but the probability of environmental behaviour is still relatively low. Variables such as education and residence affect understanding of logos, purchase of certified organic products, and knowledge of environmental organisations. (Jaderná et al., 2018). The results of Do paco and Rapso's (2009) research in Portugal showed that Portuguese consumers are aware of environmental problems. However, their concerns are not always translated into environmentally friendly behaviour. It has also been shown that consumers are ready to make

purchasing decisions based on environmental friendliness, and their purchasing behaviour differs significantly from that of “traditional” consumers. In Germany, as of 2021, 9,65 million Germans fully agreed that they would be willing to spend more money on an environmentally friendly product, while the number of those who only mostly, somewhat or hardly agreed, perhaps wishing to be sure whether an eco-friendly label was validated, was still higher (Statista, 2022). Compared to US research, Roberts (1996) researched US consumers and found a significant positive correlation between age and environmental responsibility. Behaviour. Mainieri et al. (1997), in their study of American consumers, also pointed out significant differences in ecological behaviour regarding gender, with women tending to be more pro-environmental. Other studies have investigated consumer interest in organic products. It is worth mentioning, for example, Chen and Chang (2012), Dimitri and Dettmann (2012), Khan et al. (2020).

Research methods

The basis for processing the theoretical basis were scientific databases, international journals, and Internet portals. The primary data source for the performed analysis was a questionnaire survey created using the Google form. The questionnaire survey was conducted on a research sample of 125 respondents. Respondents were consumers from Eastern Slovakia (men and women) aged 18 to 71 and living in the countryside or the city. The data collection method was occasional sampling based on available respondents, and the survey was conducted in January 2022. One-answer questions were used (Likert scale: 1-definitely yes, 5-definitely not) or multiple-choice. Subsequently, the results were processed using descriptive statistics and frequency graphs. The established hypotheses were tested using the statistical program IBM SPSS Statistics 26.

Out of 125 respondents, 76 women and 49 men took part in the survey, which in percentage terms represents 61% of women and 39% of men. The highest number of answers came from respondents aged 26 to 45 years (Figure 1).

Most respondents come from the countryside, namely 66 inhabitants, i.e., 52.8%. The city has 59 inhabitants, which is 47.2%.

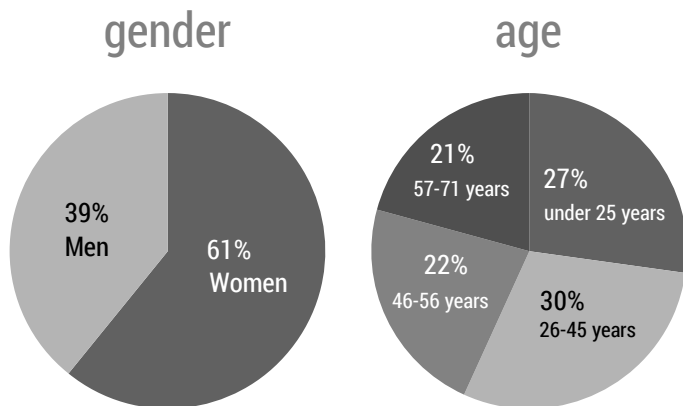


Figure 1. Gender and age composition of respondents (%)

Source: authors' work.

Results of the research

Respondents were asked which environmental certificates on products respondents knew where they could choose more than one option (Figure 2).

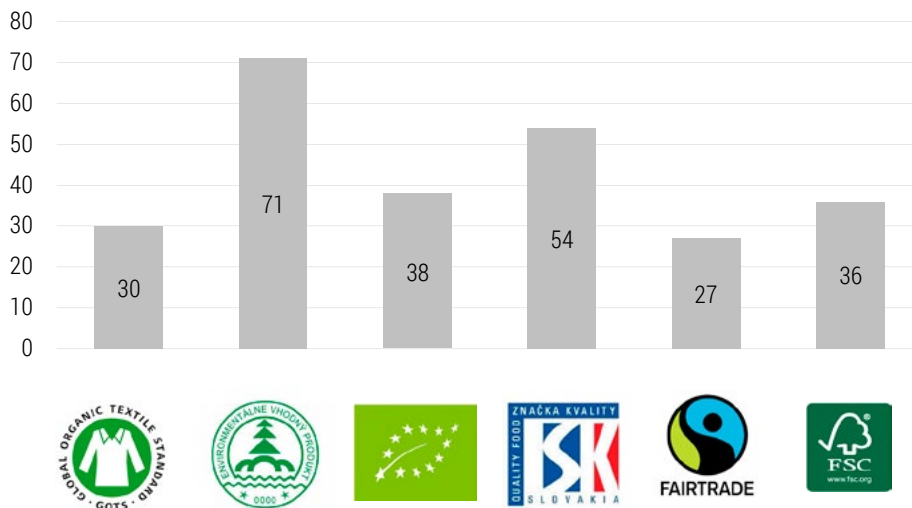


Figure 2. Graphical representation of the answers to the question: Which ecological certificate do you know about the product?

Source: authors' work.

The certificate of an environmentally suitable product was known to most respondents, which means 71 respondents, 56.8%. The second most well-known among the respondents was the ISK quality mark certificate; the knowledge of this mark was marked by 54 respondents, i.e., 43.2%. Third, in the ranking of credentials, the logo of Organic Farming in Europe was indicated by 38 respondents, which means 30.4%. The Forest Stewardship Council certificate is known to 36 respondents, with a percentage value of 28.8%. Thirty respondents, i.e. 24%, marked the Global Organic Textile Standard certificate. The least known certificate among the respondents was the Fair Trade certificate; this option was indicated by 27 respondents, which means 21.6%.

Another question examined whether the respondents were also interested in the importance of the given environmental certificates (Figure 3).

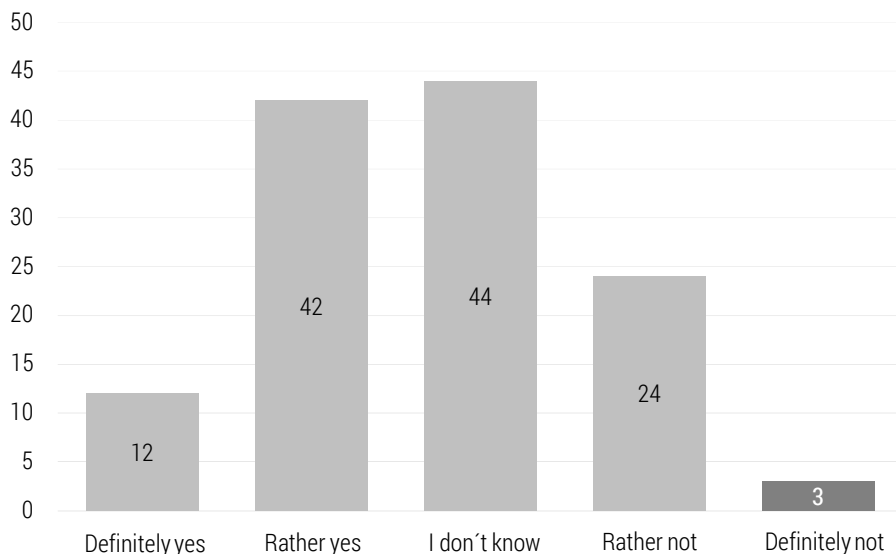


Figure 3. Graphical representation of the answers to the question: Are you also interested in the importance of the given environmental certificate on the product?

Source: authors' work.

We can see from the graph that most respondents marked the answer "I don't know". 44 respondents indicated this possibility, i.e., 35.2%. The "Rather yes" option was suggested by 42 respondents, which means 33.6%. The third most common answer was the "Rather not" option, with 24 respondents, i.e., 19.2%. 12 respondents indicated the "Definitely yes" option, i.e., 9.6%. The least marked option was the answer "Definitely not", which was marked by three respondents, i.e., 2.4%.

We also found out whether the respondents' purchasing decisions are influenced by the labelling of the product with an ecological certificate, resp. brand (Figure 4).

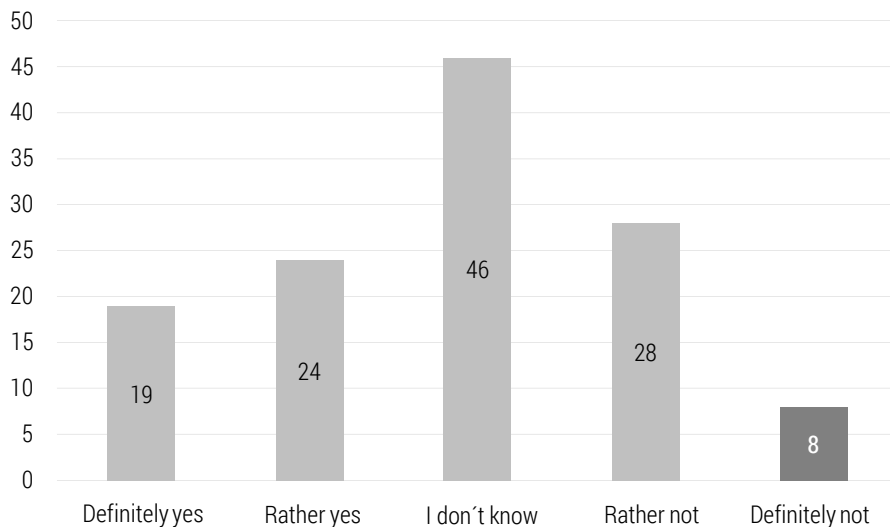


Figure 4. Graphical representation of the answers to the question: Does your purchase decision affect the labelling of the product with an ecological certificate, resp. brand?

Source: authors' work.

As many as 46 respondents marked the answer "I don't know", which means 36.8%. 28 respondents indicated the "Definitely not" option, a percentage of 22.4%. The answer "Rather yes" was marked by 24 respondents, representing 19.2%. 19 respondents indicated the "Definitely yes" option, i.e., 15.2%. The answer "Definitely not" was marked by 8 respondents, a percentage of 6.4%.

We also found out where respondents get information about environmental products and certificates (Figure 5).

Out of the 125 respondents, 52 indicated that their source of information is websites; the percentage is 41.6%. 50 respondents obtain information from the mass media, which means 40%. 19 respondents receive information on environmental products and certificates from social networks, representing 15.2%. 4 respondents gain knowledge from the professional literature, in percentage terms, 3.2%.

Another question focused on which environmental organisations respondents knew (Figure 6).

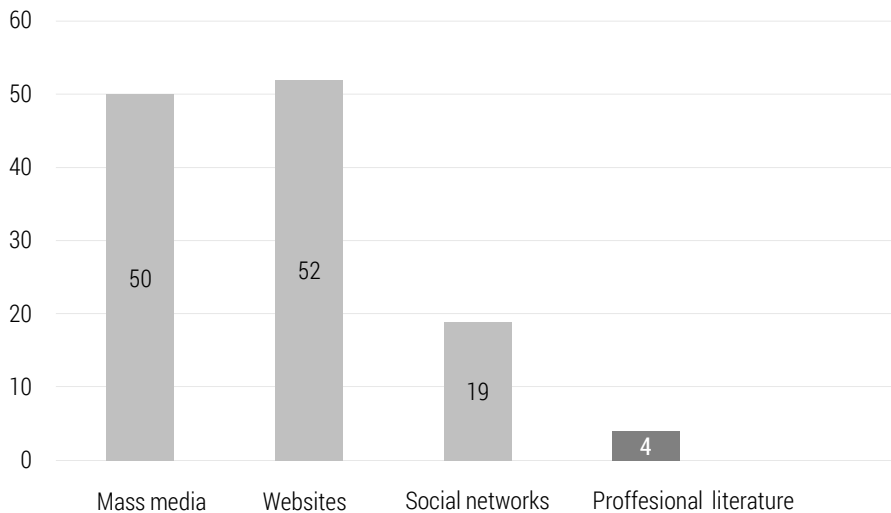


Figure 5. Graphical representation of the answers to the question: Where do you get information about environmental products and certificates?

Source: authors' work.

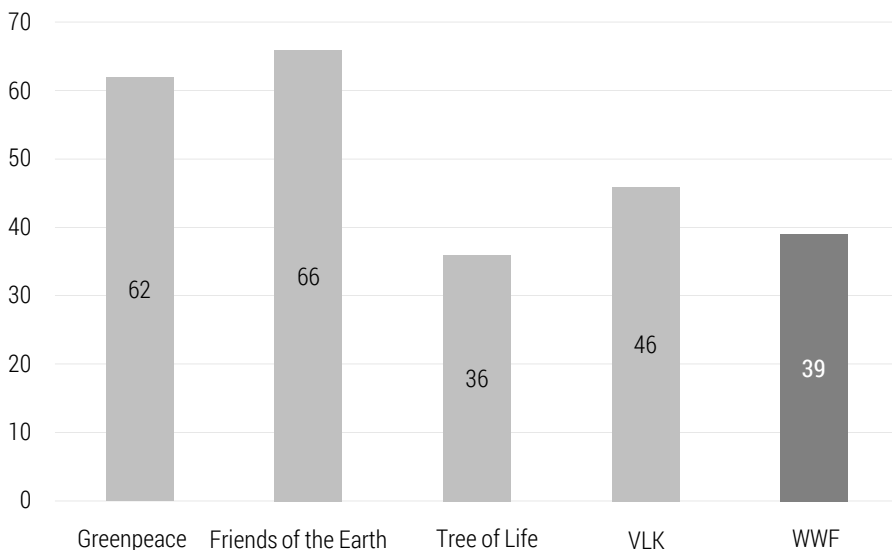


Figure 6. Graphical representation of the answers to the question: Which environmental organisations do you know?

Source: authors' work.

Respondents were able to choose from several options for this question. The Friends of the Earth organisation was the most well-known organisation, which was mentioned by up to 66 respondents, meaning 52.8%. 62 respondents know Greenpeace, i.e., 49.6%. The VLK organisation was described by 46 respondents, a percentage of 36.8%. WWF organisation was identified by 39 respondents, i.e., 31.2%. The least known organisation was the Tree of Life; this option was indicated by 36 respondents, and 28.8% of respondents indicated this option.

We also examined whether the respondents were more interested in the given environmental organisations (Figure 7).

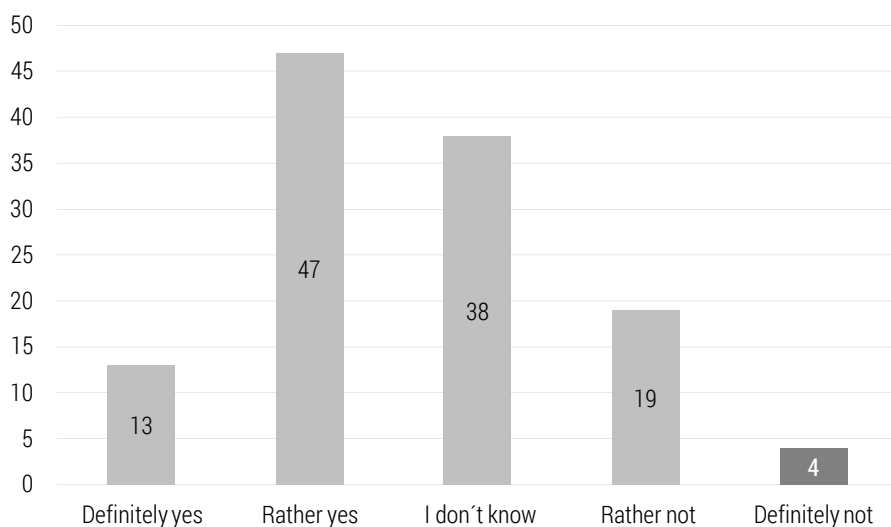


Figure 7. Graphical representation of the answers to the question: Are you more interested in the given environmental organisations?

Source: authors' work.

Most respondents indicated the answer more yes, in the number of 47 respondents, a percentage of 37.6%. 38 respondents did not know how to assess the solution, which means 30.4%. The possibility was not previously indicated by 19 respondents, representing 15.2%. The answer was undoubtedly yes by 13 respondents, a percentage of 10.4%. The answer was certainly not marked by 8 respondents, which means 6.4%.

Based on other research (e.g. Jadera et al., 2019), which dealt with gender differences or differences within the residence when investigating environmental issues, we wanted to know to what extent these differences are significant among Slovak consumers. We set the following research questions (RQ) and the resulting two research hypotheses (RH).

RQ1: Are there statistically significant differences in consumers' interest in certified products in terms of gender?

RH1: We assume that there are statistically significant differences in the interest of consumers in certified products regarding gender.

RQ2: Are there statistically significant differences in purchasing decisions regarding certified products in terms of residence?

RH2: We assume that there are statistically significant differences in purchasing decisions regarding certified products in terms of residence.

The variables were first verified by a data normality test (Shapiro-Wilk W-test). In this test, hypothesis H_0 is rejected if the p-value is less than the significance level of 0.05. In this case, the variable does not have a normal distribution, so it is advisable to use a non-parametric test. The results of normality testing showed that, in our case, $p < 0.05$, and thus the examined variables do not have a normal distribution (Table 1). Therefore, we use the nonparametric Mann-Whitney U test.

Table 1. Results of Shapiro-Wilk W test of normality

Variable	Gender/City	Shapiro-Wilk W		
		Statistic	df	p-value
Interest	Male	0.857	49	0.000
	Female	0.832	76	0.000
Shopping	Country	0.888	66	0.000
	City	0.862	59	0.000

Source: authors' work using IBM SPSS Statistics 26.

RH1 testing

H_0 : There are no statistically significant differences in the interest of consumers in certified products in terms of gender.

H_1 : There are statistically significant differences in the interest of consumers in certified products in terms of gender.

Based on the results of the Mann-Whitney U test (Table 2), it can be stated that there are significant differences between men and women in the interest in certified products. Based on average values, it can be argued that women are more interested in certified products than men. With this test, we were able to answer the first research question. Mainieri et al. (1997) and Jaderna et al. (2019) point to the difference between men and women in pro-environmental behaviour, namely that women tend to be more pro-environmental than men.

Table 2. Results of Mann-Whitney U test (Gender differences)

Mann-Whitney U test		Mean	
p-value	0.003	Men	Women
p-value	< 0.05	3.31	2.61

We reject H₀, so there are statistically significant differences in consumers' interest in certified products in terms of gender.

Source: authors' work using IBM SPSS Statistics 26.

RH2 testing

H₀: There are no statistically significant differences in purchasing decisions regarding certified products in terms of residence.

H₁: There are statistically significant differences in purchasing decisions regarding certified products in terms of residence.

Table 3. Results of Mann-Whitney U test (City differences)

Mann-Whitney U test		Mean	
p-value	0.378	City	Country
p-value	> 0.05	3.12	2.93

We do not reject H₀, so there are no statistically significant differences in purchasing decisions regarding certified products between urban and rural consumers.

Source: authors' work using IBM SPSS Statistics 26.

Based on the results of the Mann-Whitney U test (Table 3), it can be stated that there are no significant differences in purchasing decisions regarding certified products between urban and rural consumers. With this test, we were able to answer the second research question.

Conclusions

Environmental awareness is gaining immense importance today and is manifested in several areas of our lives. Consumers' interest in certified products and environmental organisations varies in age, education, place of residence, or job classification. Manufacturing companies seek to show consumers that it is also in their interest to maintain sustainable development and, among other things, emphasise the need to label environmentally

friendly products. Labelling environmental products is one way of pointing out greener products and allowing the public to choose more environmentally friendly products.

Environmental labelling of products is currently gaining great importance. Within the framework of sustainable management, it is essential to create conditions that will motivate companies to offer environmentally suitable products on the market so that the process related to certification, or obtaining the environmental label itself, is not complicated and financially demanding but also to ensure support for consumer demand for environmentally labelled products, for example by investing in the better promotion.

The Slovak Republic, like many other countries of the European Union but also the whole world, has not escaped the consequences of social and economic transformation. The interconnectedness between environmental issues and the economy is relatively high. In recent years, the environmental approach has seen a shift in focus from production facilities and production processes to final products and their environmental impacts, such as eco-efficiency, eco-design, product-oriented environmental management system, eco-labelling, and the circular economy.

The paper aimed to analyse the interest of Slovak consumers in certified ecological products and environmental organisations and to point out significant differences. We found that most respondents know the Environmentally Friendly Product certificate. Almost half of the respondents are more interested in certified products and stated that their purchasing decision is influenced by labelling the product with an ecological certificate, resp. brand. Consumers most often obtain information about organic products and certificates from websites and the mass media. The most well-known environmental organisation was Friends of the Earth, followed by Greenpeace, with more than half of the respondents interested in these organisations in more detail. The hypotheses were tested to confirm gender differences in the interest in environmental product certificates. They did not confirm differences between urban and rural residents' purchasing decisions regarding certified environmental products. Research results may be slightly distorted and influenced by the size and characteristics of the research sample. We, therefore, plan to expand the research sample in future research.

Based on the results achieved, it is possible to claim that environmentally labelled products increase the interest of consumers and the general public in environmental protection. By certified labelling of environmentally friendly products, we obtain information about the ecological approach of the manufacturer, which allows us to prioritise such a product over an unlabeled product. As a result of the wide variety of goods offered on the market, we have the option of choosing, which makes it possible to constantly develop the level of environmental awareness and move towards more responsible

behaviour towards the environment. The research results can contribute to better environmental education activities and the planning of marketing activities to promote certified ecological products. The subject of future research could be the investigation of other significant variables and factors that influence the environmental behaviour of consumers and, at the same time, a comparison based on other socio-demographic characteristics. The research could also be aimed at comparing the obtained results with the results of similar studies in other countries.

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The contribution of the authors

Martin Rovnak – 45% (conception, data analysis, interpretation, discussion).

Lenka Stofejova – 40% (literature review, data analysis, language correction).

Lubomir Kmec – 5% (literature review, data collection, interpretation).

Miroslav Benko – 5% (literature review, data collection, interpretation).

Daniel Salabura – 5% (literature review, data collection).

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