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THE GREEN PURCHASE AWARENESS OF CROATIAN YOUNG ADULTS' CONSUMERS

Sanja Knežević Kušljčić

PhD, Assistant professor, University of Slavonski Brod, Slavonski Brod, Croatia,
sknezevic@unisb.hr; ORCID ID: 0000-0003-1298-4281

Abstract: *The environmental problems of today both in world and in Croatia leads to the challenge of how to purchase products in order to listen to environmental rules. The goal of this research is to analyze the impact of factors that affect the young adults' consumers awareness on green purchase. This research examines the green purchase awareness of Croatian young adults' consumers and its influence on purchase intention of eco-friendly products. Survey research has been conducted on a sample of 653 respondents in Croatia. The theory of planned behavior was used in this research. The model examines the influence of several independent variables on the intention to purchase eco-friendly products using correlation and multiple regression. The research results show that attitudes about eco-friendly products, subjective norms, perceived behavioral control, knowledge about eco-friendly products and feelings of guilt are statistically significantly related to intentions to purchase eco-friendly products. By considering the demographic characteristics it was determined that the level of education significantly affects the intention to buy eco-friendly products, in contrast to all other demographic variables, which have no significant influence. The results of this research contribute in way that increase the knowledge of researchers about the theory and results that occur in the field related to sustainable development and environment and especially purchase intention toward the eco-friendly product in Croatia. The results of this research are expected to be a reference for further research in the field of eco-friendly products.*

Keywords: *purchase, eco-friendly product, consumer behavior, young adult's*

JEL Classification: *Q50*

INTRODUCTION

The negative impact of climate change, industrialization and the expansion of technology on the environment has become a major issue of concern worldwide. It started in June 1992, at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, where more than 178 countries adopted Agenda 21, a comprehensive plan of action to build a global partnership for sustainable development to improve human lives and protect the envi-

ronment . The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is currently relevant. Agenda is a plan of action for people, planet and prosperity which consists of 17 Sustainable Development Goals with 169 associated targets which are integrated and indivisible. European Union (EU) also made a positive and constructive contribution to the development of the 2030 Agenda and EU is committed to implementing the SDGs in all policies and encourage EU countries to do the same . Besides that, EU has taken a particular approach to circular economy, with high expectations to increase competitiveness, promote economic growth and create jobs while reducing environmental impacts and resource dependency . Making the EU a more resource-efficient, climate neutral, and pollution-free circular economy calls for more sustainable products .

As consumers' interest in protecting the environment and their own health increases, so does the demand for eco-friendly products, which further leads to the development of the market for eco-friendly products. Consequently, organizations are turning to the production of eco-friendly products. Eco-friendly products are one of the major ways of acting in harmony with the environment. Defining a sustainable/green/eco-friendly product is very complex because a completely eco product does not exist.

An eco-friendly product could be defined as "one constituted of materials and associated with production practices along its entire life cycle recognized for being socially and environmentally responsible" . Eco-friendly products are products with the goal of minimizing their impact on the environment. They are often known as biodegradable, recyclable, natural, organic, non-toxic, green, or sustainable products. It can also refer to them as environmentally friendly products that cause minimal harm to the environment. They are usually made from recycled paper, metal, plastic, and glass, or obtained from bamboo or cotton. On the eco-friendly product there must be a label that confirms its credibility. Eco-friendly products have a lower impact on the environment throughout their life cycle, i.e., from the raw materials used in their manufacturing, to their design, transport to the end-user, their length of use and their capacity to be recycled . There is no set standard in Europe of what makes an eco-friendly product, but here are some criteria which can help identify products that, though sometimes more expensive, are likely to be more sustainable and will save you money in the long run . The EU Ecolabel is recognized in all member states of the European Union and was introduced by an EU regulation in 1992 (Regulation EEC 880/92), has gradually become a reference point for consumers who want to help reduce pollution by purchasing more environmentally-friendly products and services (EU ecolabel, undated). In 2022, the vast majority of consumers across the globe saw their purchasing behavior become at least a little more environmentally friendly compared to five years earlier . Becoming eco-friendlier means many benefits like environmental protection (water consumption, waste production, etc.), health benefits, lower energy bills, reduced energy consumption etc. On the other hand, eco-friendly products can be more expensive and not as high-quality as conventional product. One of the major disadvantages is the high price, "75% of global consumers feel that eco-friendly products have become more expensive over the last year" . Most consumers are willing to pay a premium price if they perceive an additional value from the product . However, consumers are becoming more aware of the impact that their purchasing decisions have on the environment, so many are willing to pay more for products that are eco-friendly.

Sustainability marketed products have grown every year since 2015 with a significant share increase during the pandemic. However, the share of consumers who buy eco-friendly products is relatively small in Croatia, and it can be concluded that a positive attitude towards eco-friendly products does not necessarily lead to a purchase. Precisely because of all the above, this paper determines the factors that influence the purchase of eco-friendly products. Although factors such as environmental attitude, subjective norms, perceived behavior control, environmental knowledge, appeared to be the most studied variables impacting intention to buy eco-friendly products the more recently research of shows that green consumer behavior is affected also by cultural, personal, political, psychographic, and ethical values. The purpose of this research is to gain new knowledge about young adults' consumer behavior in purchasing eco-friendly products. In research aimed at predicting young adults' consumer behavior, the theory of planned behavior is the most well-known. The results of this research can be used to understand the young adults' consumers awareness on eco-friendly purchase.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Constant interest in ecological and eco-friendly products is growing, both among the producers of such products, so among customers as well as academics researchers. It is precisely for this reason that there is a large number of researches on this topic.

Most research both in Croatia and in the world has revealed that the extended theory of planned behavior explains much more variation for green purchase behavior. For this reason, most research on eco products applies the extended TPB for its predictive ability.

Most of the papers in the field of environmental studies include attitudes towards eco products, subjective norms and perceived behavioral control. The extended model adds most frequently used variables such as environmental concerns, environmental knowledge, awareness. Empirical consumer studies have supported that those variables are important attributes in the purchase of eco-friendly products.

The links between green purchase intention and ethical behavior and willingness to pay the higher price have also been examined in various research. The results showed that consumers in Croatia commonly behave ethically and they are willing to pay a higher price for eco-friendly products. Emotions are important in consumer decision making and many researchers have agreed that TPB model is more significant when it includes emotional factors. However only a few authors used the additional variable feeling of guilt. Other variables worth mentioning are green label variables, green social influence, health consciousness, perceived higher quality of green products, availability of green products which are the subject of research by different authors. Technological competence can be cited as the main characteristic of today's time and precisely the variable digital communication was found to have significant influence on green purchase intention.

Some previous research in Croatia have contributed to the research of eco products using the theory of planned behavior in their studies. The results identified variables (attitudes towards eco products, knowledge and awareness) as the best predictors of intention to purchase ecological products. However, most papers in Croatia are oriented towards the specific area of eco products like which investigated consumers' intentions towards purchasing natural cosmetics or which investigated organic food.

Both studies showed a strong positive correlation between purchase intentions towards eco products and confidence in the certification of eco production and eco-labels or references. According to this, most important factors that influence eco consumer purchase behavior are confidence and quality.

Research often deals with young consumers and environmental issues. Factors influencing the green purchase intention among young people (especially students) have been provided by numerous authors and their recent research who used the (extended) theory of planned behavior and various factors oriented to eco-friendly purchase intention. Understanding the perspective of young people towards green purchase intention is very important because they are the force that drives our societies forward and contributes to positive social change. and emphasized the importance of willingness to pay as the key factor that affect the green purchase behavior and authors above have demonstrated that green attitudes, subjective norms, environmental concern and environmental knowledge are the most influencing factors. Regardless of the inconsistencies in some research, it can still be seen that these are the most important researched variables. On the other hand, factors influencing the green purchase intention among all age groups showed the approximately equal results. Subjective norms, environmental knowledge and green label variables are the main factors that affect the green purchase intention.

Numerous studies in which the theory of planned behavior was used in the context of the behavior of consumers of ecological products, confirmed significant the influence of independent on dependent variables of the TPB model. To examine green purchase intention, variables such as attitudes, subjective norms, behavioral perceived control, knowledge, environmental awareness, willingness to pay a higher price are more reliable than demographics characters however there are also studies that have tried to investigate whether is there correlation between demographics characteristics in the purchase behavior of eco-friendly products . In most research there were no significant relationships between demographic characteristics and purchasing behavior of environmentally friendly products, while in some cases they are significant. Researches were conducted in different countries with different development (special emphasis on income) and therefore different results were obtained. However, it implies that consumers are influenced more by other variables which proved above-mentioned research that the respondents have positive response towards the eco-friendly products.

Additionally, there is only a few studies that have focused on the intention to purchase eco-friendly products based on the theory of planned behavior in Croatia. According to the available research, none of the studies in Croatia have measured the young consumer's intention towards purchasing eco-friendly products (with special emphasis on additional variables - knowledge about eco-friendly products and feeling of guilt).

A MODEL OF PLANNED CONSUMER BEHAVIOR

Consumer behavior is important to study because it is a dynamic process that is constantly changing and is influenced by a large number of factors such as personal, social and psychological factors. Consumers are becoming more aware of a healthy lifestyle, but also sometimes a busy lifestyle leads to the purchase of products that are not eco-friendly. The eco-friendly consumption behavior is the consumption behavior that consumers strive to protect the ecological environment and minimize the negative impact of consumption on the environment during the purchase, use and post-treatment of products.

One of the most commonly used models for the purpose of understanding consumption behavior is the theory of planned behavior according to Ajzen, and the research framework of this research will be based on this model. According to ,consumer behavior is determined by various motivational factors, and according to the theory of planned behavior, motivational factors include attitude, subjective norms and perceived control of behavior, which together influence the intention to behave . The application of the theory of planned behavior is visible in a large number of researches on eco-friendly products. Although some authors like pointed out to go beyond Ajzen's theoretical explanations of consumer purchasing behaviors. Attitudes have a very important place in consumer behavior because they are the central component of the thought structure of each individual . A more positive attitude towards a certain behavior increases the intention to perform a certain behavior , . Subjective norms are the perceived social pressure to perform or not to perform a behavior . Perceived behavioral control is a measure of how easy or difficult it is to engage in certain behavior, that is, how much control a person has over whether or not he will behave in a certain way . People are motivated to perform certain behaviors if they feel they can control the success. According to , apart from attitude, subjective norm and perceived behavioral control, this theory is open to the inclusion of additional variables in certain contexts and for certain behaviors, provided that the variables are well represented and as such improve the predictive power ability. The proposed research model in this paper, in addition to the three previously mentioned indicators of behavioral intention (attitudes, subjective norms, perceived behavioral control), two additional variables are included, knowledge about eco-friendly products and feeling of guilt. Young adults' consumers gain knowledge through advertisements such as printed media or social media which is widely spread today. Advertising is vital to reach prospective young adults to influence their intention . According to the emotion of guilt was identified as a stimulus factor for the purchase of green products.

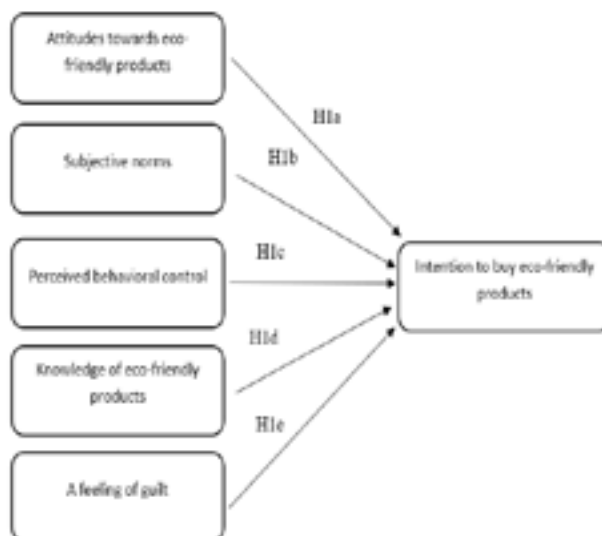


Figure 1. Model of research

Source: author modified according to Ajzen

Figure 1 shows the theoretical model of research. By including additional variables in the basic model of the theory of planned behavior, this research should lead to additional knowledge about young adults' consumer behavior regarding the purchase of eco-friendly products.

Therefore, in accordance with the aim of the research, the following hypotheses were defined:

H1: The better young consumer's green purchase awareness will lead to increased green purchase intention.

H1a Attitudes about eco-friendly products have a significant positive effect on intentions to purchase eco-friendly products.

H1b Attitudes of close people (subjective norms) have a significant positive effect on the intentions to buy eco-friendly products.

H1 c Favorable perceived control of behavior has a significant positive effect on intentions to purchase eco-friendly products.

H1 d Better perceived knowledge about eco-friendly products significantly positively affects the purchase of eco-friendly products.

H1 e A greater sense of guilt significantly positively affects the purchase of eco-friendly products.

H2: Demographic variables (gender, education, income, marital status, working status) have a positive and significant impact on green consumption awareness.

METHODOLOGY

This research analyses 653 survey responses in Croatia about their purchase intention of eco- friendly products.

Sample of respondents

The target population of this research consist of 653 respondents in Croatia. For the purpose of data collection, an online survey method was used on the Google Forms platform. The survey was conducted between April 1th, 2024 and August 1th, 2024 in Croatia shared by shared by e-mail and social circles. The survey contains a total of 23 questions. Except for the age limit (young adults from 18-34 years old), there were no other restrictions. The research survey consists of first part, where respondents filled in basic information about themselves (demographic variables) - 7 questions. Demographic variables - refer to population characteristics such as age, gender, size and stage in the family life cycle, income, education, occupation, social class, nationality and religion . These variables are most often used for market segmentation and consumer behavior prediction so certain were selected and used in this research. The second part of question consists of 1 filter question about familiarity with eco-friendly products. All those who answered that they were not familiar with eco-friendly products were excluded from research. The third part of question consists of 15 questions. The respondents had several statements at their disposal and all measurements were taken using 5-point Likert scales (ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree).

Data processing methods

Statistical data processing was done using the methods of descriptive and analytical statistics in the software package SPSS and STATISTICA. The reliability of

the measurement scales was checked using Cronbach's α -coefficient. A Pearson correlation analysis and multiple regression analysis were performed to verify the relationship between the set hypotheses. An independent sample t-test and ANOVA have been conducted in order to check whether there is a statistically significant difference in demographic characteristics.

RESULTS

The results of the research are based on the survey "The influence of ecological awareness on the purchase of eco-friendly products".

Table 1. Socio-demographic characteristics of the survey participants

Characteristics		Total (N)	%
Gender	Male	258	39,50
	Female	395	60,50
Level of education	High school	278	42,57
	Undergraduate study	168	25,73
	Graduate study	192	29,40
	Postgraduate study	15	2,30
Household income	< 700 €	48	7,45
	700–1000 €	101	15,47
	1001–1500 €	170	26,03
	1500–2500 €	219	33,54
	>2500 €	115	17,61
Marriage status	Unmarried	368	56,35
	Married	285	43,65
Working status	Unemployed	47	7,19
	Student	213	32,62
	Employed in the profession	265	40,58
	Employed, but not in the profession	128	19,61

Source: authors

Table 1 shows that 60,50% are female and 39,50% are male respondents. The majority, i.e. 278 respondents (42,57%) finished high school, 29,40% of respondents finished graduate study, 25,73% finished undergraduate study and only a small percentage of 2,30% finished postgraduate study. The largest share of respondents (33,54%) has household income between 1500–2500 €, 26,03% has between 1001–1500 €, 17,61% has more than 2500 €, and only 7,45% has less than 700 €. The percentage of unmarried people is slightly bigger (56,35%). The majority of respondents are employed, 40,58% in the profession and 19,61% not in profession, 32,62% are students and only 7,19% are unemployed. Respondents come from all Croatian counties.

Table 2. Reliability of measurement scales measured by Cronbach's α -coefficient

Variable	Number of states	Cronbach's Alpha
Attitudes towards eco-friendly products	3	,702
Subjective norms	3	,847
Perceived control of behavior	3	,708
Knowledge of eco-friendly products	3	,833
A feeling of guilt	3	,878
Intention to buy eco-friendly products	3	,864

Source: authors

From the reliability analysis, it is evident that the value of the Cronbach coefficient for attitude and perceived behavioral control has acceptable level of reliability ($\alpha > 0.7$). The coefficients for the other variables are around the 0.85 level, which indicates that the measurements of these variables are very reliable.¹ In order to verify the set hypotheses, a Pearson correlation analysis was performed.

Table 3. Correlation matrix of observed variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6
Attitudes towards eco-friendly products	1					
Subjective norms	,462**	1				
Perceived control of behavior	,441**	,461**	1			
Knowledge of eco-friendly products	,433**	,497**	,453**	1		
A feeling of guilt	,443**	,563**	,494**	,502**	1	
Intention to buy eco-friendly products	,530**	,538**	,544**	,519**	,593**	1

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Source: authors

The table shows the results of the correlation analysis in which it can be seen that the intention to buy eco-friendly products is significantly correlated (moderate to good correlation) with all variables. The highest correlation is the feeling of guilt about eco-friendly products and the intention to buy them ($r=0.593$), followed by perceived control of behavior ($r=0.544$), then subjective norms ($r=0.538$), attitudes ($r=0.530$) and knowledge ($r=0.519$). The reliability of the regression result requires the data to be normally distributed shown in the following table.

Table 4. The normality of the distribution of variables in the regression model

Variable	M	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
Attitudes towards eco-friendly products	3,482	0,701	-0,493	0,864
Subjective norms	2,776	0,853	0,058	-0,242
Perceived control of behavior	3,135	0,802	-0,244	-0,023
Knowledge of eco-friendly products	2,996	0,854	-0,007	-0,471
A feeling of guilt	2,371	0,863	0,442	-0,072
Intention to buy eco-friendly products	3,322	0,844	-0,327	-0,095

Source: authors

¹ Cronbach's coefficient values should be above 0.70. (Leech, Baret, & Morgan, 2005.)

Table shows results that skewness ranged between -0,49 and +0,44, whereas kurtosis ranged between -0,47 and +0,86, thus ensuring that the data used in the research is normally distributed.² In this research, multiple regression analysis was conducted to identify the relationship between the dependent variable and the independent variables and to test the hypotheses.

Table 5. Correlation coefficients in the regression model (summary of the model)

R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	Std. Error of the estimate
,718	,515	,512	,589

Source: authors

Table shows that the multiple correlation coefficient R, with the simultaneous presence of all independent variables (predictors) is 0.718, so it can be concluded that there is a very high level of association between the independent and dependent variables. According to the coefficient of determination ($R^2 = 0.51$), the variables in the model share 51% of common factors. This means that 51% of the variance (information) of the intention to buy eco-friendly products can be predicted (explained) by independent variables.

Table 6. Analysis of variance (ANOVA) for the regression model

Model	Sums of Squares	df	Mean Squares	F	Sig
Regression	239,846	5	47,969	137,826	0,00
Residual	225,182	647	0,348		
total	465,028				

Source: authors

The table shows that the results are statistically significant, $F(5, 647) = 137.83$ $p < 0.01$. This means that attitudes, subjective norms, perceived control, knowledge and feeling of guilt significantly predict intentions to purchase eco-friendly products. Next table contains the regression coefficients and their significance in the regression model.

Table 7. Regression coefficients and collinearity indicators in the regression model

Variable	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sg
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
Constant	0,417	0,127		3,272	0,001
Attitudes towards eco-friendly products	0,244	0,039	0,203	6,125	0,000
Subjective norms	0,134	0,035	0,136	3,785	0,000
Perceived control of behavior	0,210	0,035	0,199	5,891	0,000
Knowledge of eco-friendly products	0,143	0,033	0,144	4,208	0,000
A feeling of guilt	0,249	0,035	0,254	7,020	0,000
Intention to buy eco-friendly products	0,417	0,127	0,203	3,272	0,001

Source: authors

² As closer as it gets to -1 or 1, the better a variable can be defined by precisely knowing the value of the other variable (Pallant, 2005.)

Table shows results that the increase in the score for all variables by one point increases the average score on the scale of intentions to buy eco-friendly products by 0.24; 0.13; 0.21; 0.14 and 0.24 points. It follows that the independent variables significantly and positively affect the purchase of eco-friendly products, since the t-test values are significantly different from zero and are significant at $p < 0.01$. A feeling of guilt is the most significant predictor ($\beta = .254$, $p < .000$) This is followed by attitudes ($\beta = .203$, $p < .000$), followed by perceived control of behavior ($\beta = .199$, $p < .000$), followed by knowledge ($\beta = .144$, $p < .000$) and subjective norms ($\beta = .136$, $p < .000$).

The relationship between demographic characteristics and the intention to purchase eco-friendly products

In the research, the relationship between demographic variables and the intention to buy eco-friendly products was additionally examined using a t-test and one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA). Using the t-test, no statistically significant difference was found in the intention to purchase eco-friendly products with regard to gender and marital status. Using ANOVA, no statistically significant difference was found with regard to income and working status, but a statistically significant difference was found with regard to education, which is shown in the following table.

Table 8. One-way ANOVA for independent samples as opposed to variable level of education

Variable	Education	M	F	df	p value ($p \leq 0,05$)
Intention of purchase of eco-friendly products	High school	3,158	6,6940	649	0,00019
	Undergraduate study	3,424			
	Graduate study	3,440			
	Postgraduate study	3,688			

Source: authors

Table shows that there is a statistically significant difference in purchase of eco-friendly products considering to the level of education. ($F(3, 649) = 6,6940$, $p = 0,00019$) Tukey's post hoc test indicated that there are significant differences between groups, high school and undergraduate and graduate study.

DISCUSSION

The predictors chosen for the research were attitudes towards eco-friendly products, subjective norms, perceived control of behavior and additional variables: knowledge and feeling of guilt. The findings of the research revealed that according to Pearson correlation and multiple regression hypotheses H1, H1a, H1b, H1c, H1d and H1e are confirmed. That means that all variables have significant roles in predicting the eco-friendly purchase intention of Croatian young adults' consumers.

The hypothesis H1 states that the better young adults' consumers green purchase awareness will lead to increased green purchase intention. This hypothesis is confirmed because all hypotheses H1a, H1b, H1c, H1d, and H1e are confirmed.

The results are mostly consistent with the majority of previously mentioned research such as where all variables significantly influence the intention to buy environmental food (attitudes, subjective norms, perceived control of behavior) or with the results of the research of where results showed a significant correlation among the

attitudes, subjective norms, perceived behavioral control, green purchase intention and green purchase behavior.

The additional variable knowledge about eco- friendly products positively affect the purchase of eco-friendly products which is consistent with research of which implies that consumers who are interested in eco-friendly products and are more knowledgeable on the matter are more likely to act eco-friendly. The more knowledge of environmental problems and issues, the more consumers intend to purchase eco-friendly products. It is also in line with research of . They added a new variable "knowledge" that has been showed to significantly influenced green purchase intention. The additional variable "feeling of guilt" was very rarely used in researches but these results are consistent with study of that examined green purchase intention and revealed that guilt positively influence the intention to purchase green products and study of which showed that the emotion of guilt was identified as a stimulus factor for the purchase of green products. A feeling of guilt is the most significant predictor ($\beta = .254, p < .000$). That means that higher level of guilt lead to significant purchase decision.

The hypothesis H2 states that demographic variables (gender, education, income, marital status, working status) have a positive and significant impact on green consumption awareness. There is a statistically significant difference in purchase of eco-friendly products considering to the level of education. No statistically significant difference was found with regard to gender, income, marital status, and working status. Hypothesis 2 is partially accepted. Most of the studies on customer-related elements that influence green product purchase intention and green product behavior have studied demographic characteristics and their effects, most regularly gender, age, income and education. Most of the research that examined these variables revealed a noteworthy influence on green purchase intention and green purchase behavior In research of there was no bias in terms of age, gender or qualification in the behavior of young students. Although most research doesn't show statistically significant difference, however the result is consistent with the research of whose research has proven that higher level of education of consumers buying more environmentally friendly products.

CONCLUSION

Environmental problems become increased in last decades, so society demands actions that can suppress or reduce the causes of these problems. Consumption is pointed as one of the main causes of environmental problems so green products, sustainably produced, can be a solution to environmental problems. Because of that this research investigated young adults' eco-friendly purchase intention.

The correlation and regression research results indicate that the main hypothesis H1 has been successfully confirmed. Namely, by applying the extended theory of planned behavior, it was determined that there is a statistically significant connection between attitudes, subjective norms, perceived behavioral control, knowledge and feelings of guilt. Based on the obtained results, the tested hypotheses (H1a, H1b, H1c, H1d and H1e) were accepted. These findings support the results of several studies conducted by authors referenced in this research. The model explained 51% of the variance of the intention to buy eco-friendly products, thus concluding that the intention is influenced also by some other variables that are not included in our model.

By analyzing demographic characteristics and their connection with the inten-

tion to buy eco-friendly products, it was determined that only the level of education significantly affects the intention to buy eco-friendly products. Considering that, other demographic characteristics have no significance, hypothesis H2 is partially accepted.

This research contributes in way that increase the knowledge of researchers about the theory and results that occur in the field related to sustainable development and environment and especially purchase intention toward the eco-friendly product in Croatia. The results of this research are expected to be a reference for further research in the field of eco-friendly products.

This research refers to the examination of the awareness of the intention to buy eco-friendly products as a whole, and not to specific types of products (food, etc.). Therefore, it is suggested that in the next researches, the attitudes and the intention to buy certain types of products are examined in more detail. In order to improve the model, it is suggested to include some other independent variables in the research like age groups and make a comparison with young people.

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