



UNDERSTANDING SUSTAINABLE PURCHASING BEHAVIOUR THROUGH THE MARKETING MIX: AN INSTITUTIONAL THEORY PERSPECTIVE

Patricia MILIĆ, Tomaž ČATER
University of Ljubljana, School of Economics
and Business, Ljubljana, Slovenia

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This study advances research on sustainable food consumption and marketing strategies by applying institutional theory. Drawing on the concepts of the institutional logic of sustainable development and institutional legitimacy, the research provides new insights into how societal values and institutional frameworks may be reflected in sustainable marketing strategies and how they are associated with purchasing behaviour. Based on data collected through a questionnaire, the study finds that seven antecedents – quality, packaging, willingness to pay, product availability, effort, perceived information availability, and labelling – are significant predictors of sustainable food purchasing behaviour. Hence, the results offer a structured overview of which consumer-perceived antecedents that firms may influence through the marketing mix are most strongly associated with sustainable purchasing decisions. By integrating institutional theory with sustainability-focused marketing research, this study interprets the findings through an institutional perspective and highlights the importance of aligning marketing strategies with societal values and institutional frameworks of post-transition economies, and the critical role of pragmatic and cultural-cognitive legitimacy in relation to consumer trust and sustainable purchasing decisions.

Keywords: sustainable purchasing behaviour, consumer-related barriers, marketing mix, institutional theory, legitimacy



Patricia Milić, University of Ljubljana, School of Economics and Business, Kardeljeva ploščad 17, 1000 Ljubljana, Slovenia.
E-mail: Patricia.Milic@ef.uni-lj.si

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, sustainability initiatives have been introduced at multiple levels – international (e.g. the EU), national, municipal, and within companies. Consumers are becoming increasingly aware of the environmental impacts of their purchasing decisions, while many companies have responded to changing preferences by offering more sustainable products (Davari & Strutton, 2014). To create value for selected customer segments, companies design marketing strategies and implement them through a mix of marketing elements (Kotler & Armstrong, 2018). Nevertheless, products are often designed to deliver quick benefits that do not fully match customer expectations (Davari & Strutton, 2014). One consequence, relevant to sustainable food consumption, is that although many consumers hold positive attitudes towards sustainable food products, only a small share actually purchase them (Rausch & Kopplin, 2021). Even though the attitude–behaviour gap has been extensively examined (e.g., Dangelico et al., 2021; Yadav & Pathak, 2017), research on sustainable consumer behaviour in relation to the marketing mix – and how different consumer-perceived antecedents that firms may influence through the marketing mix impact sustainable food consumption – remains limited. This gap between consumer preferences and current sustainable product offerings underscores the need for further investigation and strategic refinement in sustainable marketing efforts.

The aim of this study is to examine the antecedents of sustainable consumer purchasing behaviour in the context of food products through the lens of the marketing mix. To understand how these antecedents are embedded within broader societal and institutional influences, we analyse the role of institutional legitimacy and the institutional logic of sustainable development.

The paper aims to make both theoretical and practical contributions. Theoretically, it contributes to the literature on sustainable consumption by examining consumer-perceived antecedents of sustainable purchasing behaviour through the marketing mix framework, thereby providing a structured and integrated perspective on factors that firms may influence. In doing so, the study moves beyond prior research that has predominantly focused on attitudes and intentions by jointly examining multiple marketing-related antecedents within a single empirical model. Additionally, the study adopts an institutional theory perspective to interpret how these marketing-related factors may be understood in light of broader societal norms and legitimacy considerations. In this way, it contributes to the emerging literature applying institutional the-

ory at the micro (consumer) level (Bashir, 2019; Gleim et al., 2019) by offering an interpretive lens for understanding sustainable consumption. Practically, this paper provides new insights for companies seeking to improve their marketing strategies, align their sustainability efforts with consumer expectations, and strengthen their value proposition. After identifying key factors linked to sustainable purchasing decisions, the study offers targeted recommendations to bridge gaps between corporate initiatives and consumer needs.

In terms of context, the study focuses on sustainable consumption in the food and beverage sector, whose importance is reflected in several United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. The sector's supply chains make it a major source of pollution and one of the most resource-intensive industries globally in both developing and developed countries (Adams et al., 2023; Amoako et al., 2020). Addressing these challenges is therefore essential, as minimising pollution through sustainable marketing strategies can, in turn, foster more sustainable food-purchasing behaviour. The study is set in Slovenia, a highly relevant context given its strong commitment to environmental performance and sustainability initiatives. Slovenia ranks among the top five countries in environmental performance, is within the top 20 globally in the number of ISO 14001 environmental certificates issued, and its citizens are found to be environmentally conscious (Hojnik et al., 2020). Slovenia's sustainability priorities and environmentally conscious population present an advanced context and thus an opportunity to explore the antecedents of sustainable consumer purchasing behaviour in the food sector through the lens of the marketing mix, offering insights that other, less developed countries may adapt and implement. From an institutional perspective, such a context is particularly informative because the institutional logic of sustainable development is likely to be more salient, allowing for a clearer examination of how marketing-related factors are interpreted and enacted by consumers within an environment where sustainability norms are relatively well established.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Institutional theory

Institutional theory has traditionally been applied at the organisational (mezzo) and national (macro) levels (Bashir, 2019) to explain the pressures shaping organisational behaviour, but it can also be applied at the individual (micro) level (see Bashir, 2019; Gleim et al., 2019; Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013). Individuals, like organisations, are embedded in institutional environments and respond to perceived expectations of what

constitutes acceptable or legitimate behaviour (Gleim et al., 2019). From this perspective, consumer decisions may be understood as socially embedded rather than purely individual choices, reflecting broader institutional expectations and legitimacy considerations. Prior research suggests that institutional pressures and logics can help explain individual purchasing behaviour in specific consumption contexts (Bradley, 2021; Chaney et al., 2016), including halal consumption (Bashir, 2019). Applying institutional theory at the individual level therefore provides a useful lens for understanding how consumers may interpret marketing actions within broader institutional contexts and how organisations can act as agents of change that support sustainable food consumption (Bradley, 2021; Chaney et al., 2016). Accordingly, this study adopts a micro-level institutional perspective to interpret sustainable purchasing decisions in the food and beverage sector through the concepts of institutional pressures and institutional logics.

From an institutional theory perspective, markets are viewed as organisational fields composed of a collection of institutions. These institutions refer to shared practices, understandings, and rules among actors within a given organisational field (Thornton, 2004). Legitimacy is a vital concept in institutional theory and can take various forms, including regulative, pragmatic, normative, and cultural-cognitive legitimacy. It is particularly valuable for understanding how marketers can act as agents of change, reshaping markets to gain consumer acceptance in the context of sustainable consumption.

Alongside legitimacy, institutional logics (ILs) are an essential element of institutional theory that help explain how sustainable strategies may be associated with sustainable consumption. Friedland and Alford (1991) introduced the concept of ILs to explain individual practices within social institutions. ILs shape the actors' identities, serve as a frame of reference, and influence both individual and organisational behaviour (Martin et al., 2017; Seidler et al., 2018). Importantly, multiple ILs can coexist, while both organisations and individuals can draw on them simultaneously (at least temporarily). Although actions are judged as (il)legitimate based on their alignment with the dominant IL (Thornton, 2004), there are limited insights into how sustainable consumption is facilitated from an institutional perspective through sustainable marketing strategies. In this regard, pro-environmental and sustainable behaviours are often promoted according to specific logics. Prior research suggests that actors operating under a pro-environmental logic and the institutional logic of sustainable development can contribute to promoting sustainable behaviours (Seidler et al., 2018; Silva & Figueiredo 2017).

Similarly, corporate sustainability practices are enabled when the IL of sustainable development dominates within a company and in its operating environment (Laasch, 2018). The IL of sustainable development, a relatively new logic reflecting the paradigm of sustainable development, may coexist as either a dominant or competing logic within a given context. However, for sustainable initiatives to succeed, the IL of sustainable development typically needs to be sufficiently salient within the organisational and broader institutional environment (Silva & Figueiredo, 2017; Seidler et al., 2018; Thornton, 2004).

We build on the assumption that effectively designing and implementing sustainability-oriented marketing activities that shape consumer-perceived antecedents through the marketing mix are facilitated when the IL of sustainable development is salient at the organisational level. When the IL of sustainable development becomes dominant in the society, organisations may act as agents of change by leveraging resources to create and transform consumer practices (Chaney et al., 2016; Laasch, 2018). By influencing consumers' legitimacy perceptions, organisations may contribute to shifts in purchasing behaviour towards more sustainable choices. Hence, this study uses institutional theory not to examine organisational responses to external pressures, but to interpret how consumers perceive firm-initiated marketing actions in light of evolving societal norms around sustainability. The marketing mix is therefore employed not as a theory, but as a framework to structure the marketing actions that are subject to consumer judgement. Accordingly, the empirical model focuses on consumer-perceived marketing-related antecedents, while institutional theory is used to provide a broader interpretive framework for the findings.

Sustainable purchasing behaviour

Consumers increasingly express favourable attitudes and demand sustainable options (Yadav & Pathak, 2017); however, actual sustainable purchasing remains limited (Rausch & Kopplin, 2021). This discrepancy, commonly referred to as the attitude-behaviour gap, reflects the disconnect between consumers' sustainability intentions and their purchasing behaviour. From an institutional perspective, this gap suggests that consumers are influenced by competing ILs, whereby the IL of sustainable development may be insufficiently dominant to translate positive attitudes into consistent behaviour (Gleim et al., 2019). Barriers such as perceived higher costs, limited product availability, and concerns about product quality continue to impede sustainable purchasing behaviour despite growing awareness (Chauke & Duh, 2019; Jalilvand et al.,

2017). Known as the "attitude-behaviour gap," this phenomenon reflects the disconnect between consumers' intentions and their actual behaviour. Over the past two decades, numerous studies have applied Ajzen's theory of planned behaviour to explore this gap, particularly in the context of green, ethical, and sustainable purchasing, including fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) (Dangelico et al., 2021; Qi et al., 2024). However, few studies have examined factors that can be shaped by a firm's marketing activities and subsequently influence sustainable consumer behaviour. Early research on sustainable consumer behaviour primarily emphasised green consumption (e.g., Gleim et al., 2013). Over time, terminology has evolved, with concepts such as "sustainable" or "responsible" purchasing behaviour now encompassing broader aspects of sustainable development, including both social and environmental dimensions (Amoako et al., 2020; Hosta & Zabkar, 2020). Sustainable consumer behaviour today thus reflects a preference for goods that are eco-friendly, ethically sourced, and sustainably produced.

The marketing mix and antecedents of sustainable purchasing behaviour

The study builds on the marketing mix as a framework for organising firm-influenceable antecedents of sustainable purchasing behaviour. Rather than treating the 4Ps as direct explanatory variables, we use them to categorise consumer-perceived factors through which firms may shape the value proposition of sustainable food products. This approach enables a structured synthesis of antecedents identified across prior sustainable consumption research while focusing specifically on those factors that organisations can influence through marketing activities. We reviewed more than 60 papers on sustainable, responsible, green, and ethical purchasing behaviour and compiled a comprehensive list of variables, although only those that influence sustainable consumption and may be influenced by firms through marketing activities are presented (Appendix A). Prior research suggests that sustainable purchasing behaviour is shaped by a combination of product-related evaluations, price perceptions, accessibility considerations, and informational cues. However, the relative importance of these antecedents remains unclear, particularly when examined simultaneously within an integrated framework. The paragraphs below outline the antecedents included in the study and their relationship with sustainable purchasing behaviour. Although many studies in Appendix A emphasise "value for money," linking quality and price, this study excludes it, as price is addressed separately.

Product

Quality. Perceived quality reflects the extent to which a product meets consumer expectations (Jalilvand et al., 2017). In the context of sustainability, it signifies a product's perceived sustainable superiority, which positively influences consumer evaluations and purchasing behaviour (Riva et al., 2022). Although prior research reports mixed perceptions regarding the quality of sustainable food products, the central issue appears to be whether sustainability attributes are interpreted as enhancing or compromising expected product performance. Sustainable food products are sometimes perceived as lower in quality and higher in price, discouraging purchases (Skard et al., 2020), while scepticism about their quality may increase perceived purchase risk (Gleim et al., 2013; Riva et al., 2022). Conversely, when sustainability is associated with superior product attributes, such perceptions can strengthen purchase motivation (Gomes et al., 2023). In the literature, quality consistently ranks as a top purchasing criterion, often outweighing price considerations (Jalilvand et al., 2017), which leads to the following hypothesis:

- H1 Higher perceived quality of sustainable food products is positively associated with sustainable food purchasing behaviour.

Packaging. Customers' purchase decisions largely depend on a product's packaging, as consumers may decline to purchase a product that otherwise meets their criteria, if the packaging is unsatisfactory (Amoako et al., 2020). In the context of sustainable consumption, packaging serves as a highly visible cue through which consumers infer the environmental responsibility of a product. As consumers become increasingly aware of the environmental impacts of their purchasing decisions (Hojnik et al., 2020; Iovino et al., 2024), a shift in packaging preferences has emerged. For instance, plastic packaging is regarded as undesirable and environmentally damaging (Menzel et al., 2021), whereas packaging made from sustainable materials tends to promote sustainable food purchases. Consumers are also willing to choose an alternative food product if it comes in sustainable packaging (Ketelsen et al., 2020). This suggests that packaging can influence sustainable purchasing not only through functional considerations, but also through the symbolic sustainability signals it conveys at the point of purchase. Accordingly, we hypothesise:

- H2 Sustainable packaging is positively associated with sustainable food purchasing behaviour.

Local origin. Local food is defined as products produced and consumed within a few hundred miles or within a specific state or country (Kumar et al., 2021). In this study, we define it within national borders, as this aligns with the "few hundred miles" criterion. Local origin is often associated with sustainable consumption because consumers may interpret geographic proximity as a proxy for environmental and community benefits (Bimbo et al., 2020; Birch et al., 2018). Environmentally and community-conscious consumers are more likely to purchase sustainable food products, and local food is perceived as healthier, fresher, more nutritious, and tastier – key factors driving purchases of locally sourced products (Bimbo et al., 2020; Birch & Memery, 2020). It is also viewed as more trustworthy and safer to consume because its origin is easier to trace due to shorter supply chains (Birch & Memery, 2020). Moreover, shorter supply chains may reinforce the perception that local food is environmentally preferable due to lower transportation-related emissions (Kumar et al., 2021). This leads us to propose the following hypothesis:

H3 Local origin of food products is positively associated with sustainable food purchasing behaviour.

Price

Willingness to pay. Willingness to pay is a common construct in sustainability and marketing research, reflecting how much consumers are willing to spend on sustainable products (Dangelico & Vocalelli, 2017). As such, it captures the extent to which consumers perceive sustainability-related benefits as sufficiently valuable to justify a price premium (Moser, 2016). In addition to willingness to pay, previous research also highlights broader price-related considerations, such as product affordability, as potentially relevant in sustainable food purchasing decisions, particularly in periods of rising food prices and economic pressure (Lee et al., 2021; Watts et al., 2023). These findings suggest that consumers' responses to sustainable product pricing may depend not only on their acceptance of price premiums, but also on their broader perceptions of financial accessibility in everyday consumption contexts. More specifically, willingness to pay reflects the extent to which consumers are prepared to spend additional financial resources to obtain a certain product and indicates the value they place on companies' sustainability efforts (Narayanan & Singh, 2023). Understanding consumer responses to price variations is crucial for companies seeking to develop effective marketing activities aimed at supporting sustainable food purchases (Narayanan & Singh, 2023). Several studies report that consumers

are willing to pay a premium for sustainably sourced goods (Chauke & Duh, 2019; Narayanan & Singh, 2023); however, the findings are not unanimous. Nevertheless, the prevailing evidence suggests that consumers are willing to pay a price premium for sustainable alternatives, leading to the following hypothesis:

- H4 Higher willingness to pay for sustainable food products is positively associated with sustainable food purchasing behaviour.

Place

Product availability. Consumers require sustainable food products to be available at the right place and time (Gleim et al., 2013; Nguyen & Dang, 2022), and they often abandon the idea of purchasing sustainably if such products are not stocked in their preferred stores (Chakraborty et al., 2022). This is particularly relevant for food products as routine purchases, where consumers expect convenient access and multiple in-store alternatives. Sustainable products must therefore be clearly visible on store shelves and available across a wide range of stores to encourage purchase decisions (Stolz & Bautista, 2015). Although the literature presents mixed findings regarding the relationship between product availability and sustainable purchasing behaviour, the prevailing argument is that greater accessibility reduces practical barriers and increases the likelihood of sustainable purchase decisions (Chakraborty et al., 2022; Gleim et al., 2013; Nguyen & Dang, 2022). Accordingly, we hypothesise:

- H5 Higher availability of sustainable food products is positively associated with sustainable food purchasing behaviour.

Effort. Effort refers to the perceived convenience of accessing sustainable products, including the physical and time investments made in searching for, selecting, and purchasing them (Papista et al., 2018). If consumers perceive that sustainable food products take too much time to find or are difficult to locate, they may abandon the idea of making the purchase. Conversely, ease of use and a convenient shopping experience attract customers, facilitate sales, and enhance customer satisfaction (Karim et al., 2024). Consequently, we propose:

- H6 Greater effort needed to acquire sustainable food products has a negative association with sustainable food purchasing behaviour.

Promotion

Information availability and communication efforts. Information availability is vital for predicting responsible consumer behaviour, as it shapes consumer knowledge through the quantity and quality of accessible information (Hosta & Zabkar, 2020). Access to relevant and trustworthy sustainability information can reduce information asymmetry and increase consumers' confidence in sustainable purchase decisions (Chang et al., 2021; Kumar & Yadav, 2021). However, the effectiveness of such information depends not only on its availability but also on how it is communicated. Consumers increasingly experience information overload from sustainability claims and may interpret excessive or vague messaging as greenwashing, which heightens scepticism and erodes trust, even when the information is accurate and credible (Iovino et al., 2024; Osburg et al., 2019). In this study, communication efforts refer to consumers' perceptions of how companies promote sustainable food products through advertising-related messages. Following Stolz and Bautista (2015), the construct emphasises whether such communication is perceived as convincing, informative, and credible. This perspective focuses on the quality and trustworthiness of promotional messages rather than their volume or frequency. Prior research suggests that trust in sustainability claims can positively influence purchasing behaviour (Osburg et al., 2019). Accordingly, communication efforts should be specific, transparent, and credible in order to positively shape consumers' evaluations of sustainability claims and purchasing decisions (Chetoui et al., 2021; Gleim et al., 2013; Petrescu et al., 2019). Based on the current understanding of perceived information availability and communication efforts, we propose:

H7 Perceived information availability is positively associated with sustainable food purchasing behaviour.

H8 Company's communication efforts are positively associated with sustainable food purchasing behaviour.

Labels. Labels are typically placed on packaging and serve as one of the tools marketers use to communicate sustainability attributes and transparency values (Qi et al., 2024). Because sustainability characteristics are often credence attributes that consumers cannot easily verify themselves, labels may function as credibility signals that reduce uncertainty in purchase decisions (Qi et al., 2024). Consumers often find it difficult to assess the truthfulness of such claims; as a result, third-party labels are highly valued because they provide assurance that sustainability claims are credible (Taufique et al., 2017). Yet for labels to be effective, consumers must understand and trust

them (Taufique et al., 2017). When trusted, labels can facilitate sustainable purchasing by translating complex sustainability information into accessible point-of-purchase cues (Dangelico & Vocalelli, 2017). Building on these findings, we hypothesise:

H9 Greater trust in sustainability labels on product packaging is positively associated with sustainable food purchasing behaviour.

METHOD

Data collection

Data were collected from a representative sample of Slovenian consumers (aged 18–69) using the TalkOnline panel. The final sample includes 632 fully completed questionnaires, and the sample characteristics are presented in Table 1. To minimise social desirability bias, respondents were assured of complete anonymity and informed that the survey would be used exclusively for academic purposes to encourage honest responses. At the beginning of the survey, participants were reminded that there were no right or wrong answers, emphasising the importance of their personal experiences and opinions. The computer-assisted survey, conducted via Qualtrics, eliminated interviewer presence, further reducing potential bias. Efforts to address common method bias included the use of clear and concise language and the avoidance of complex or ambiguous terms and double-barrelled questions (Podsakoff et al., 2012).

TABLE 1
Sample characteristics

		%
Gender	Men	51.1
	Women	48.9
Age	18–29 years	16.1
	30–39 years	21.5
	40–49 years	22.9
	50–59 years	20.2
	60–69 years	19.1
Education	Elementary school or less	2.1
	High school	44.5
	Bachelor's degree	29.5
	Master's degree	22.6
	Ph.D.	1.1
Household size (members)	1	13.8
	2	31.2
	3	24.7
	4	20.4
	5	6.8
	6 or more	3.2

Measures

To measure the constructs, the study used previously validated 7-point reflective multi-item scales. The constructs, along with their measurement scales, standardised factor loadings, and references, are presented in Table 2. Two constructs were measured using reverse-coded items. In particular, the construct perceived information availability was operationalised through reverse-coded items, such that higher scores indicate respondents' perceived ability to access and verify sustainability-related product information. In addition to the constructs described in Table 2, the study collected demographic data, including participants' gender, age, education, and household size (Table 1).

RESULTS

Measurement model

Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) shows that the fit of the measurement model is acceptable ($\chi^2 = 931.611$, $df = 333$, $p < 0.01$; $\chi^2/df = 2.798$; RMSEA = 0.05; SRMR = 0.08; TLI = 0.94; CFI = 0.95) (Hair et al., 2010). All composite reliability (CR) values exceed the recommended threshold of 0.7 (ranging from 0.86 to 0.91) (Hair et al., 2010), and with respect to convergent validity, all average variance extracted (AVE) values are above the recommended 0.5, ranging from 0.67 to 0.86 (Hair et al., 2010). In addition, all t -values of the measurement items' loadings on their respective latent variables are statistically significant, supporting the model's convergent validity (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988). Discriminant validity is confirmed, as the square root of each construct's AVE (reported on the diagonal in Table 3) is greater than its inter-factor correlations (Hair et al., 2010). Multicollinearity was also assessed, and all VIF values are below 1.8, indicating no multicollinearity concerns (Hair et al., 2010). Furthermore, to assess the potential presence of common method bias, Harman's single-factor test was conducted. The analysis revealed multiple factors with eigenvalues greater than one. The first factor accounted for 23.42% of the total variance, which is well below the commonly used 50% threshold (Kock et al., 2021) and the more conservative 40% guideline suggested by Babin et al. (2016). Together with the procedural remedies applied during data collection, this suggests that common method bias is unlikely to pose a serious concern in this study.

The correlation matrix, Cronbach's α values, and information on the reliability and validity of the data are provided in Table 3. The analysis of the measurement and structural models was performed using maximum likelihood estimation in SPSS Amos 29.

	Constructs and measurement scales	Standard factor loadings
Product	<i>Quality</i> (Gleim et al., 2013)	
	Sustainable food products are of excellent quality.	0.83
	Sustainable food products are of superior quality compared to conventional ones.	0.89
	Sustainable food products are the best.	0.83
	<i>Packaging</i> (Amoako et al., 2020)	
	I support food products with biodegradable packaging.	0.82
	I support food products with recyclable packaging.	0.86
	I support food products whose packaging is made from sustainable materials.	0.84
	<i>Local origin</i> (Adapted from Bryła, 2019)	
	The local (Slovenian) origin of sustainable food products is important to me.	0.72
	I prefer local sustainable food products because they are more environmentally friendly than imported ones.	0.88
	It is always best to purchase local food products.	0.87
Price	<i>Willingness to pay</i> (Campbell et al., 2014)	
	I am willing to pay a higher price for sustainable food products, regardless of their other attributes.	0.76
	I find it acceptable to pay a higher price for food produced in a sustainable manner.	0.83
	I am willing to pay a higher price for food that does not exploit producers or harm the natural environment.	0.92
Place	<i>Product availability</i> (Stolz & Bautista, 2015)	
	Sustainable food products are clearly visible on the retail store shelves.	0.84
	Sustainable food products are offered through a wide range of products in nearby stores.	0.86
	Sustainable food products are offered through a wide range of stores.	0.74
	<i>Effort</i> (Papista et al., 2017)	
	Finding sustainable food products requires too much time.	0.71
	Finding suitable sustainable food products requires too much effort.	0.91
	Sustainable food products are hard to find.	0.82
Promotion	<i>Perceived information availability</i> (Hosta & Zabkar, 2020)	
	I usually do not know where to verify the information about the environmental and social impact of food products. (r)	0.75
	I do not know the environmental and social impact of food products I usually buy. (r)	0.94
	I do not know the impact of the production process of environmentally and socially friendly food products I usually buy. (r)	0.90
	<i>Communication efforts</i> (Stolz & Bautista, 2015)	
	Advertising of sustainable food products is convincing.	0.88
	Advertisements of sustainable food products present all important information.	0.90
	Advertisements of sustainable food products are credible.	0.86
	<i>Trust in sustainability labels</i> (Silva et al., 2020)	
	Most sustainability claims on package labels are intended to mislead consumers. (r)	0.93
	I do not believe most sustainability claims made on package labels. (r)	0.86
Sustainable food purchasing behaviour	(Yadav & Pathak, 2017)	
	I have been purchasing sustainable food products regularly.	0.88
	I engage in sustainable purchasing behaviour for food products I consume daily.	0.90
	I have been purchasing sustainable food products for the past six months.	0.77

TABLE 2
Measurement scales

Note: Reverse-coded items are indicated with (r).

Variable	Cronbach			1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
	α	CR	AVE										
1 Quality	0.88	0.89	0.73	0.85									
2 Packaging	0.88	0.88	0.71	0.44	0.84								
3 Local origin	0.86	0.86	0.68	0.56	0.40	0.83							
4 Willingness to pay	0.87	0.87	0.70	-0.07	-0.10	-0.12	0.84						
5 Product availability	0.85	0.86	0.67	0.42	0.20	0.36	0.01	0.82					
6 Effort	0.85	0.86	0.67	-0.14	-0.15	-0.13	0.30	0.09	0.82				
7 Perceived information availability	0.89	0.90	0.75	0.04	0.03	0.09	0.23	0.25	0.34	0.86			
8 Communication efforts	0.91	0.91	0.77	0.55	0.19	0.32	-0.02	0.55	-0.06	0.09	0.88		
9 Trust in sustainability labels	0.89	0.92	0.86	0.06	0.09	0.02	-0.18	0.13	-0.21	-0.22	0.02	0.93	
10 Sustainable food purchasing behaviour	0.88	0.91	0.78	0.54	0.34	0.34	0.11	0.56	-0.15	0.13	0.39	0.38	0.88

TABLE 3
Correlation matrix, Cronbach's α , construct reliability, and AVE

Note: Below the diagonal: zero-order correlations; on the diagonal the square root of AVE.

Structural model

The results of the structural model show that the fit is acceptable ($\chi^2 = 790.335$, $df = 332$, $p < 0.01$; $\chi^2/df = 2.381$; RMSEA = 0.05; SRMR = 0.04; TLI = 0.95; CFI = 0.96) (Hair et al., 2010). The exogenous variables explain the endogenous variable Sustainable purchasing behaviour (BEH) relatively well ($R^2 = 0.48$). Gender, household size, and age are included as control variables. Table 4 presents the results of the tested hypotheses. The results are calculated for a standard 95% confidence level and the values presented are two-tailed; however, all hypotheses are directional.

TABLE 4
Analysis of the hypotheses

Hypothesis				Standardised estimates	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	Result
Hypothesis 1	Quality	→	Sustainable food purchasing behaviour	0.36	6.45	< 0.01	Supported
Hypothesis 2	Packaging	→		0.10	2.53	= 0.01	Supported
Hypothesis 3	Local origin	→		-0.02	-0.49	= 0.63	Not supported
Hypothesis 4	Willingness to pay	→		0.24	6.04	< 0.01	Supported
Hypothesis 5	Product availability	→		0.34	7.65	< 0.01	Supported
Hypothesis 6	Effort	→		-0.17	-4.13	< 0.01	Supported
Hypothesis 7	Perceived information availability	→		0.11	2.70	< 0.01	Supported
Hypothesis 8	Communication efforts	→		-0.02	-0.45	= 0.65	Not supported
Hypothesis 9	Trust in sustainability labels	→		0.08	2.19	= 0.03	Supported

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The paper advances the understanding of consumer behaviour in the sustainability context and offers valuable guidance for companies seeking to align their marketing activities with the growing demand for sustainable products. By focusing on consumer-perceived antecedents that firms can influence through

the marketing mix, while also examining their impact through the lens of institutional theory, the study delivers both theoretical and practical insights by assessing multiple antecedents, identifying priorities, and outlining activities to promote sustainable purchasing behaviour in the food sector. The empirical results identify associations between consumer-perceived antecedents and sustainable purchasing behaviour, while institutional theory is used as an interpretive lens to contextualise these relationships rather than as a directly tested explanatory model.

Theoretical implications

The study provides valuable insights into how institutional theory – particularly institutional legitimacy and the IL of sustainable development – can be used to interpret sustainable food consumption. Drawing on the foundational works of Friedland and Alford (1991) and Thornton (2004), institutional theory, especially the IL of sustainable development, serves as a lens for understanding marketing strategies that contribute to sustainable behaviour. Institutional logics provide a useful lens for interpreting organisational practices and consumer perceptions of sustainability efforts (Martin et al., 2017), deepening our understanding of organisations as agents of change. Institutional theory suggests that when the IL of sustainable development is strong within organisations, those organisations may be more likely to align their marketing activities with sustainability goals, influence consumer behaviour, and steer purchasing decisions towards more sustainable options (Laasch, 2018; Seidler et al., 2018).

Our findings highlight the need for adaptability in sustainable consumption, where the IL of sustainable development must coexist with competing logics, such as those emphasising economic efficiency or convenience. Organisations that establish the IL of sustainable development as their dominant logic may be better positioned to design effective sustainable marketing activities that resonate with consumers and, through the 4Ps, support shifts in consumer behaviour in line with broader societal changes towards sustainability (Silva & Figueiredo, 2017). ILs provide a framework for understanding how norms evolve, suggesting how sustainable behaviour may become more widely adopted over time. By adopting the IL of sustainable development as the dominant logic, organisations may be better positioned to contribute to shaping consumer preferences and societal norms. This dynamic interplay between organisations and consumers underscores the transformative potential of the IL of sustainable development for understanding developments towards a more sustainable marketplace.

Based on the tested hypotheses, the paper offers several specific theoretical implications. First, the observed relationships between product availability and quality and sustainable behaviour can be interpreted in relation to cultural-cognitive institutional legitimacy. Sustainable products must align with established norms and consumer sustainability expectations (Seidler et al., 2018). Ensuring widespread availability is crucial for mainstream adoption, as seamless integration into consumers' daily lives enhances legitimacy. Firms that fail to provide accessible sustainable options risk losing customers, competitive advantage, and credibility, which may erode their legitimacy in increasingly sustainability-driven markets. While availability appears to be associated with legitimacy, the effort required acts as a barrier, indicating consumers' reluctance to invest significant time or energy to acquire sustainable products. This finding may be interpreted as illustrating a tension between the IL of sustainable development and convenience-driven pragmatic legitimacy. Thus, companies that minimise consumer effort while maintaining sustainability initiatives are more likely to be perceived as legitimate.

Second, our findings indicate that sustainable food purchasing is also associated with pragmatic legitimacy factors such as willingness to pay, which may be interpreted through the lens of pragmatic legitimacy. As Thornton (2004) suggests, organisations that embed sustainability within their core IL are better equipped to translate initiatives into consumer behaviour. Similarly, Gleim et al. (2019) argue that pragmatic legitimacy bridges the gap between consumer choices and external pressures by emphasising perceived benefits. The antecedent willingness to pay highlights the relevance of price considerations in relation to the feasibility of sustainable consumption, aligning with Thornton's (2004) view that legitimacy is linked to both consumer acceptance and corporate strategies. By addressing affordability barriers, organisations can make sustainable options more accessible to diverse consumer segments while reinforcing their legitimacy in the marketplace.

Third, the results reveal that although packaging and trust in sustainability labels are weaker antecedents, they still have a significant impact on sustainable food purchases. These findings can be interpreted as reflecting the role in cultural-cognitive legitimacy, as packaging and labels serve as key touchpoints that bridge organisational claims and consumer perceptions, embedding sustainability cues into the consumer's first physical interaction with the product (Amoako et al., 2020; Menzel et al., 2021). In particular, the positive effect of trust in sustainability labels suggests that such touchpoints are most influential when consumers perceive sustainability claims as credible. Their relevance for consumer decision-mak-

ing illustrates how organisations can leverage cultural-cognitive legitimacy to build trust from the outset and align sustainability claims with consumer expectations (Amoako et al., 2020; Menzel et al., 2021).

Further, the non-significant effect of communication efforts should be interpreted cautiously, as the construct captures consumers' perceptions of sustainability-related advertising as convincing, informative, and credible rather than the broader quality or depth of sustainability communication (Chetioui et al., 2021). The finding may therefore suggest that advertising-based sustainability messages alone show limited association with sustainable food purchasing behaviour. It may also reflect consumer scepticism towards sustainability advertising (Nguyen et al., 2023) or limited differentiation across sustainability messages, which may lead consumers to perceive many claims as similar and assign them limited decision-making value (Iovino et al., 2024). Instead, consumers may respond more positively to transparent and verifiable sustainability information delivered through concrete cues such as labels, packaging, or accessible product information, as reflected in the significant effects of perceived information availability and trust in sustainability labels. These findings suggest that concrete informational cues may contribute more strongly to pragmatic legitimacy than generic promotional messaging (Chetioui et al., 2021; Petrescu et al., 2019).

Interestingly, the non-significant effect of local origin suggests that although respondents may evaluate locally sourced food positively, localness does not necessarily translate into sustainable purchasing behaviour when more immediate considerations are present (Feldmann & Hamm, 2015). This may indicate that, although consumers may partly associate local origin with sustainability, such associations do not automatically translate into sustainable purchasing behaviour in routine food-purchasing decisions. In particular, consumers may assign greater weight to tangible and easily verifiable attributes such as quality, availability, or packaging than to geographic origin. This interpretation is broadly consistent with previous research indicating that, while attributes such as local origin are often positively evaluated by consumers, they do not always translate into actual purchasing behaviour when stronger drivers are present (Feldmann & Hamm, 2015; Vermeir & Verbeke, 2006). The finding may also reflect the multi-dimensional nature of the construct, as local origin can simultaneously signal domestic preference, geographic proximity, and perceived sustainability benefits. From an institutional perspective, local origin may therefore represent a context-dependent cue whose relevance depends on whether consumers associate it with clear and credible environmental or social value.

The findings suggest that legitimacy is a dynamic, multi-faceted concept shaping both organisational actions and consumer responses. Hence, the findings may be interpreted as indicating that pragmatic legitimacy is particularly relevant, as consumers increasingly demand concrete, actionable information aligned with their sustainability values. In this sense, organisations may support sustainable consumption by aligning their activities with consumer expectations and broader societal norms. Although our interpretations of findings primarily speak to pragmatic and cultural-cognitive legitimacy, sustainable consumption is also shaped by broader normative and regulative institutional forces, which provide the institutional backdrop against which consumers interpret sustainability-related marketing activities. The Slovenian context, characterised by relatively strong sustainability norms and institutional support, provides an informative setting for interpreting these findings, as it reflects an environment in which the institutional logic of sustainable development is likely to be more salient and thus more clearly observable in consumer evaluations and behaviour. To conclude, these interpretations should be viewed as theory-informed inferences derived from the observed empirical relationships rather than as direct evidence that respondents consciously applied legitimacy judgements or specific institutional logics in their decisions.

Practical implications

The paper offers several practical implications for organisations in the food and beverage sector seeking to improve sustainable marketing strategies and encourage sustainable food purchases. Quality – identified as one of the strongest antecedents of sustainable food purchasing behaviour – should be a top priority, even surpassing price considerations (Jalilvand et al., 2017). In the food and beverage sector in particular, organisations should emphasise superiority in attributes such as freshness, taste, and nutritional value to further distinguish sustainable products from mainstream alternatives (Chauke & Duh, 2019; Jalilvand et al., 2017). In addition, consumers' willingness to pay a premium for sustainable food products underscores the need for organisations to clearly communicate added value by highlighting the social and environmental benefits that justify higher prices.

Alongside quality, product availability is another key antecedent, suggesting that organisations should clearly label sustainable food products on store shelves, offer a diverse range of options, and ensure their consistent presence in conveniently located stores. Organisations should also minimise the effort and time consumers expend to obtain sustainable

food products (Karim et al., 2024). Nevertheless, these two antecedents appear to function more as hygiene factors rather than direct motivators of sustainable food purchasing behaviour. This suggests that consumers may perceive product availability and low acquisition effort as basic prerequisites for considering sustainable food products, while other attributes may become more important once these expectations are fulfilled.

Finally, the study highlights the importance of perceived information availability. Organisations should prioritise providing detailed and accessible information through content-rich communication channels. Generic sustainability advertising may be less effective unless consumers perceive such messages as credible, informative, and supported by verifiable evidence. Trust in sustainability labels appears to facilitate sustainable purchasing behaviour by increasing the credibility of sustainability claims and reducing consumer uncertainty. Therefore, companies should invest in reputable third-party certifications and trustworthy labelling systems, while displaying such labels prominently on packaging, as these labels function as critical touchpoints for strengthening consumer confidence, building trust, and reinforcing the perceived legitimacy of sustainability claims.

Limitations and suggestions for future research

The study focuses exclusively on the food and beverage sector, and the insights may therefore not be applicable to other industries. Future research could examine a broader range of products or services to allow for cross-sector comparisons or alternatively focus on a single product category to generate more detailed insights and marketing implications.

The price-related aspect of sustainable purchasing behaviour was operationalised in this study through the willingness to pay. Future research could therefore further expand the understanding of price-related dimensions of sustainable consumption by examining additional constructs related to consumers' financial considerations, such as perceived affordability or price acceptability. Exploring these dimensions may provide more nuanced insights into how economic constraints and perceptions of financial accessibility relate to sustainable food purchasing behaviour, particularly in periods of increased economic uncertainty and rising food prices. Furthermore, the study examines only antecedents that can be to some extent influenced by companies. Exploring consumers' personal characteristics or values as potential moderators could provide deeper insights and support more tailored strategic approaches for different consumer segments. Moreover, al-

though our study proposes a two-level approach, data collection was limited to consumers. We therefore recommend conducting qualitative research to explore barriers to sustainable consumption from the company perspective, followed by consumer-focused studies to gain more nuanced insights into why consumers do not walk their sustainability talk. Additionally, the study relies on self-reported measures of sustainable purchasing behaviour, which may be subject to social desirability bias. Although procedural and statistical remedies were applied, future research could benefit from incorporating measures of actual purchasing behaviour.

From a theoretical point of view, a further limitation is that institutional theory is used only as an interpretive framework rather than being directly tested through explicit measures of institutional pressures, legitimacy dimensions, or institutional logics. Therefore, we recommend that future studies operationalise and test institutional constructs in order to further examine their role of institutional theory in shaping sustainable purchasing behaviour.

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Razumijevanje održive potrošnje putem marketinškog miksa: perspektiva institucionalne teorije

Patricia MILIĆ, Tomaž ČATER

Sveučilište u Ljubljani, Ekonomski fakultet, Ljubljana, Slovenija

Ova studija unapređuje istraživanja o održivoj potrošnji hrane i marketinškim strategijama primjenom institucionalne teorije. Polazeći od koncepata institucionalne logike održivog razvoja i institucionalne legitimnosti, istraživanje pruža nove uvide u to kako se društvene vrijednosti i institucionalni okviri mogu odraziti na održive marketinške strategije i kako su povezani s ponašanjem kupaca. Na temelju podataka prikupljenih upitnikom studija pokazuje da je sedam značajki – kvaliteta, pakiranje, spremnost na plaćanje, dostupnost proizvoda, napor, dostupnost informacija i označavanje – značajno povezano s održivim ponašanjem kupaca. Rezultati nude strukturirani pregled značajki za koje potrošači percipiraju da imaju najjače povezanosti s održivim odlukama potrošača, a na koje poduzeća mogu utjecati marketinškim miksom, pružajući jasniju osnovu kojim marketinškim aktivnostima treba dati prioritet. Integracijom institucionalne teorije i marketinga usmjerenog na održivost, ova studija interpretira nalaze iz institucionalne perspektive te ističe važnost usklađivanja marketinških strategija s društvenim vrijednostima i institucionalnim okvirima posttranzicijskih ekonomija, kao i ulogu pragmatične i kulturno-kognitivne legitimnosti u odnosu na povjerenje potrošača i održive odluke kupovanja.

Ključne riječi: održiva potrošnja, prepreke povezane s potrošačima, marketinški miks, institucionalna teorija, legitimnost



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