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CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR WHEN BUYING ECO-LABELLED PRODUCTS: LESSON FOR PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

ABSTRACT: *The research investigates consumer behaviour when purchasing eco-labelled products, emphasising trust, perceived consumer efficiency, and barriers such as price and availability. The aim of the article is to analyse Slovak consumers' behaviour when buying eco-labelled products and to identify the main factors influencing their decisions. Data were collected through an online questionnaire (N = 757) and analysed using χ^2 tests, ANOVA, regression, and SEM. The results indicate that trust significantly predicts purchase frequency, while barriers diminish this effect. Eco-labels have the strongest impact in everyday consumption categories (food, cosmetics, drugstore products). The source of information is crucial, with personal recommendations and online reviews enhancing trust, whereas social networks tend to weaken it. The findings confirm that the effectiveness of eco-labels depends on their credibility, transparency, and the context of the product category. The article highlights practical implications for policymakers and businesses, strengthening independent certification and improving the clarity of labels can bridge the gap between attitudes and actual purchasing behaviour.*

KEYWORDS: *consumer behaviour, ecolabell, public administration, certification, purchasing.*

RECEIVED 07 April 2026; **ACCEPTED** 05 June 2026.

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, growing environmental pressures and the accelerating climate crisis have profoundly transformed how consumers and businesses approach consumption. Scientific evidence shows that unsustainable consumption patterns contribute significantly to greenhouse gas emissions, biodiversity loss, and resource depletion, making the shift toward more sustainable consumption an urgent priority. The European Union, through its policies (e.g., the European Green Deal), emphasises sustainability, the circular economy, and reducing

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the carbon footprint. Within this policy framework, eco-labels have emerged as a key instrument for promoting responsible consumer decision-making by providing clear and verifiable information about the environmental aspects of products.

Eco-labels indicate that a product meets certain environmental standards, such as the origin of raw materials, manufacturing methods, energy consumption, or recyclability. Consumers who trust these labels are prepared to alter their purchasing habits and often pay more for a more environmentally friendly option. Despite consumers' positive attitudes, however, empirical studies consistently show a gap between expressed values and actual behaviour, recognised as the green gap.

Research into consumer behaviour shows that trust is the main issue. Consumers are overwhelmed by a multitude of labels, not all of which are independently certified, and some of which may be perceived as greenwashing. A lack of trust can lead to scepticism and rejection of eco-friendly products, even if they would otherwise meet consumer preferences. However, in addition to trust, barriers such as price, availability, and perceived quality of eco-friendly products also play a significant role. The role of information channels also deserves special attention. Consumers obtain information about eco-friendly products through packaging labels, advertisements, digital media, and recommendations from friends. The credibility of these sources directly influences trust and, consequently, purchasing behaviour. Recent research in Western Europe and Asia has shown that personal recommendations and independent certifications strengthen trust, while social media may sometimes undermine it.

In the Slovak context, consumer interest in eco-friendly products, particularly in the categories of food, drugstore items, and cosmetics, is increasing. However, studies show a gap between expressed attitudes and actual purchasing behaviour (Sörqvist et al., 2024; Bartáková, Ganobčík and Halmo, 2024). Despite growing relevance, research on eco-labels in Central and Eastern Europe remains limited, and there is a lack of evidence on how Slovak consumers interpret labels, which sources they trust, and how barriers shape their decisions.

The aim of this article is to analyse the behaviour of Slovak consumers when purchasing eco-labelled products and to identify the key determinants of their decision-making.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Eco-labels and their significance Eco-labels are an essential means of environmental communication between producers and consumers (Taufique et al., 2016). They emphasise that eco- labels act as a "bridge of trust" and enable consumers to distinguish products that meet environmental criteria from conventional alternatives (Califano et al., 2025). They highlight that the effectiveness of eco- labels depends on their recognisability and consumers' ability to interpret their meaning.

In the European Union, eco- labelling is regarded as a key tool for enforcing environmental policies. An example is the EU Ecolabel, awarded to products that meet strict environmental standards. Empirical studies confirm that consumers perceive these labels positively, but their actual use depends on awareness and trust (Dwivedi et al., 2019).

Trust is a crucial factor when assessing the impact of eco- labels (Imran et al., 2025). Research indicates that higher levels of trust are associated with a greater willingness to purchase eco- friendly products. Conversely, greenwashing- defined as exaggerated or misleading environmental claims- undermines trust and increases scepticism towards all eco- labels (Signes et al., 2023), indicating that a lack of trust is a major reason for the persistent green gap.

Subsequently, the concept of perceived consumer effectiveness (PCE) was introduced as a measure of an individual' s belief that their decisions can influence environmental issues. Research demonstrates that higher PCE increases the likelihood of buying eco- friendly products (Zhu and Song, 2025). This factor can affect behaviour directly or indirectly through trust in eco- labels.

There is no grand theory that fully explains consumer behaviour in relation to eco- labelled products. However, two behavioural theories offer a useful framework for understanding this phenomenon: the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) and the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) (Yadav and Pathak, 2017). According to TRA, consumer behaviour is primarily driven by behavioural intentions, which are shaped by attitudes and subjective norms. TPB extends this model by adding perceived behavioural control as a determinant, recognising that consumers may either respond spontaneously to emerging environmental

concerns or act according to pre-established intentions to purchase eco-labelled products (Joshi and Rahman, 2015). When examining consumer behaviour in purchasing eco-labelled products, it is therefore important to understand the underlying theoretical perspectives (Matusšíková et al., 2024). These theories provide a conceptual lens that explains why trust, attitudes, social influence (Lukáč et al., 2024), and perceived control matter in shaping actual behaviour. A theoretical grounding also helps interpret empirical results and supports the development of a coherent framework for future research (Testa et al., 2021).

The green gap illustrates the discrepancy between attitudes and behaviour. Laksmawati et al. emphasised that despite rising environmental awareness, many consumers do not consistently purchase eco-friendly products (Laksmawati, Hsieh and Yang, 2024). The main barriers include perceived higher prices, limited availability, concerns about quality, and a lack of transparent information (Dwivedi et al., 2022).

The impact of eco-labels varies across product categories. Rossi and Rivetti have shown that eco-labels have the strongest influence in everyday sectors such as food, cleaning products, and cosmetics. They also highlight that companies use eco-labels in these areas to gain a competitive advantage (Rossi and Rivetti, 2022).

Sources of information greatly influence trust. Shaikh et al. emphasise that independent certification authorities are viewed as more trustworthy than commercial advertisements (Shaikh, Yamim and Werle, 2024). Pranta et al. add that social networks and digital media improve the visibility of eco-labels, but can also foster scepticism if consumers encounter conflicting information (Pranta et al., 2024). Based on the literature, we assume that trust and PCE are key predictors of how often eco-labelled products are purchased, while barriers such as price, availability, and quality weaken this relationship. Information channels impact trust and, indirectly, purchasing behaviour. We expect the strongest effect in categories of daily consumption of labelled products and aim to identify the key determinants of their decision-making.

Public administration and state institutions play a significant role in shaping the effectiveness and credibility of eco-label systems. In the context of environmental governance, the state acts not only as a regulator establishing certification standards and legal frameworks, but also as a guarantor of transparency and consumer protection (Dwivedi et al., 2021). Studies emphasise that consumers tend to trust eco-labels more when they are supported or

monitored by independent public institutions rather than solely by private companies or commercial organisations. Regulatory oversight reduces the risk of greenwashing and strengthens the perceived legitimacy of environmental claims, thereby increasing consumer confidence and willingness to purchase eco-labelled products. Public institutions are therefore considered essential actors in ensuring that eco-labels function as credible policy instruments promoting sustainable consumption (Gorton, et al., 2021)

Beyond regulation, governments also influence consumer behaviour through public communication strategies, educational initiatives, and sustainability policies. The European Union has increasingly incorporated eco-labels into broader environmental and circular economy strategies, recognising them as tools that can support responsible consumption and climate objectives (Hou et al., 2023). Public administration may contribute to the effectiveness of eco-labels by supporting awareness campaigns, promoting environmental literacy, and integrating sustainable procurement principles into public purchasing practices. In this sense, eco-labels are not only market-based communication tools but also instruments of public policy that connect environmental regulation, consumer protection, and sustainable development goals. This perspective highlights the importance of institutional trust and governance quality in shaping consumers' responses to eco-labelled products (Courtat et al., 2023).

METHODOLOGY

The research was conducted using a questionnaire survey from March to May 2025. The questionnaire was distributed online via social networks and personal contacts, targeting consumers in Slovakia aged 17 and above. A total of N = 757 valid responses were collected after removing incomplete questionnaires. The sampling method used can be described as convenience sampling, which aligns with common practice in consumer behaviour research. Although this approach limits the generalisability of the findings, it effectively captures behaviour patterns within the specific population.

The questionnaire consisted of 21 questions focusing on key areas of behaviour: perception and knowledge of eco-labels (have you noticed the labels, do you understand their meaning); decision-making process (consideration of eco-labels when purchasing, frequency of purchase); trust and verification of authenticity (assessment of the credibility of labels,

tendency to verify their authenticity); product categories (multiple choice: food, cosmetics, cleaning products, clothing and footwear, electronics, other); decision-making factors (rated on a 5-point Likert scale, where 1 = not important at all and 5 = very important, including price, quality, availability, design, brand credibility, and eco-labeling); information channels (packaging, online reviews, social media, influencers, family/friends, official websites, and certification bodies); attitudes towards eco-labels (agreement with statements about confusing symbols, the need for explanation, and the risk of abuse, on a Likert scale); and demographics (age, gender, education).

For multi-item constructs (decision factors, attitudes towards eco-labels), internal consistency was tested using Cronbach's α , with all values exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.70.

From an analytical perspective, descriptive analysis was utilised – frequencies, percentages, averages, standard deviations. Hypothesis testing included: H1 (consideration of eco-labels \times purchase frequency): χ^2 test of independence, one-factor ANOVA. H2 (trust \rightarrow purchase frequency): Pearson's correlation and linear regression. H3 (PCE \rightarrow trust \rightarrow purchase): mediated regression analysis (PROCESS macro) and PLS-SEM. H4 (product categories \times purchase frequency): χ^2 test and post-hoc analysis of differences. H5 (moderation of barriers): hierarchical regression with interaction effects and PLS-SEM. H6 (information sources \rightarrow trust \rightarrow purchase): mediated regression and SEM. The significance of the relationships was evaluated at the $\alpha = 0.05$ level. P values, β coefficients, and 95% confidence intervals were reported.

Before formulating the hypotheses, the theoretical framework and prior empirical studies were thoroughly examined to identify the key constructs and their anticipated relationships. Drawing on signalling theory, the theory of planned behaviour, and earlier research findings, several assumptions were formulated. Trust in eco-labels is expected to positively influence purchasing frequency, while barriers such as price or availability are likely to moderate this effect. Information channels are presumed to affect trust, which in turn mediates purchasing behaviour. Additionally, differences between product categories are expected to shape the strength of these relationships. This systematic approach offers a clear overview of how theoretical assumptions translate into testable propositions. Based on this conceptual and empirical foundation, the following hypotheses were formulated:

- H1: Consumers who consider eco-labels when shopping are more likely to purchase eco-friendly products.
- H2: Greater trust in the authenticity of eco-labels positively influences the frequency of purchases of eco-friendly products.
- H3: Consumers' willingness to pay a higher price for an eco-labelled product boosts their trust in these labels, which in turn results in more frequent purchases (mediated effect of trust).
- H4: Consumers are more inclined to purchase eco-labelled products across everyday categories (food, drugstore items cosmetics).
- H5: Barriers like high prices and limited availability reduce the positive effect of trust on purchase frequency.
- H6: Exposure to credible information sources (independent certifications, official platforms) boosts trust and consequently the frequency of purchasing eco-friendly products.

RESULTS

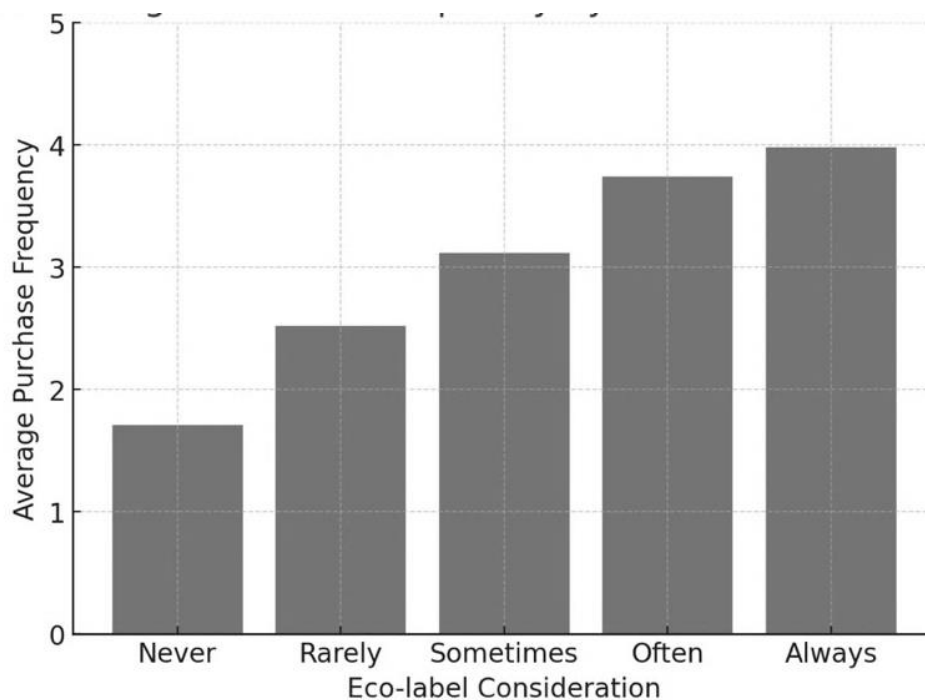
The sample consisted of N = 757 respondents. Regarding age, the 17–24 age group was the largest (51.8%), followed by the 25–34 group (16.5%). Respondents aged 35–44 comprised 9.5%, those aged 45–54 accounted for 10.7%, individuals aged 55 and over represented 5.4%, and those under 17 made up 6.1%. In terms of gender, 53.9% were women and 46.1% were men. Regarding education, secondary education was the most common (50.9%), 42.4% of respondents held a university qualification, and 6.7% reported primary education. When evaluating eco-labels, 68.2% of respondents said they consider them when making decisions. 54.7% expressed trust in their authenticity, while 43.8% actively verify their legitimacy. Purchase frequency was as follows: 14.6% buy eco-labelled products very often or often, 38.2% occasionally, 32.4% rarely, and 14.8% never. The most commonly purchased categories were food (61.1%), cosmetics (47.5%), and cleaning products (39.3%), whereas consumers were least likely to choose eco-friendly electronics (12.6%). The main sources of information included product packaging (56.8%), family and friends (43.2%), and online reviews (38.9%). Likert items indicated that most respondents agree that some labels are confusing (M = 3.9;

SD = 1.1) and that manufacturers should be required to clarify their meaning (M = 4.4; SD = 0.8). A significant portion of the sample also believed that eco-labels are misused as a marketing tool (M = 4.1; SD = 1.0).

Hypothesis testing

The initial hypothesis (H1) suggested that consumers who consider eco-labels when making purchasing decisions are more likely to buy these products regularly. The results of the χ^2 independence test ($\chi^2 (16) = 459.66; p < 0.001$) and one-way ANOVA ($F (4.752) = 99.10; p < 0.001; \eta^2 = 0.345$) confirmed a significant relationship between the variables. These findings demonstrate that simply displaying an eco-label serves as a key purchasing trigger, promoting more frequent choices eco-products.

Figure 1: Average Purchase Frequency by Eco-label Consideration

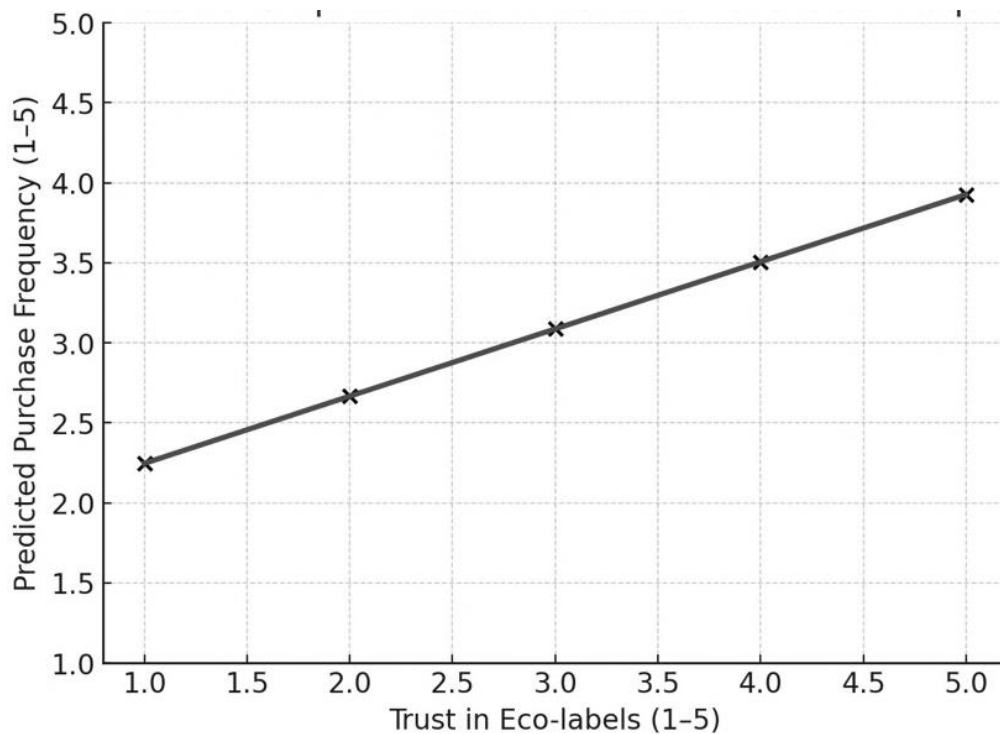


Source: own processing, 2025

The second hypothesis (H2) proposed a positive relationship between trust in eco-labels and purchase frequency. Pearson's correlation showed a moderately strong and

statistically significant link ($r = 0.418$; $p < 0.001$). Linear regression analysis also confirmed that trust significantly predicts purchasing behaviour ($\beta = 0.420$; $p < 0.001$; $R^2 = 0.174$). This suggests that higher trust leads to more frequent purchases, although it explains only part of the variation in consumer behaviour behavior.

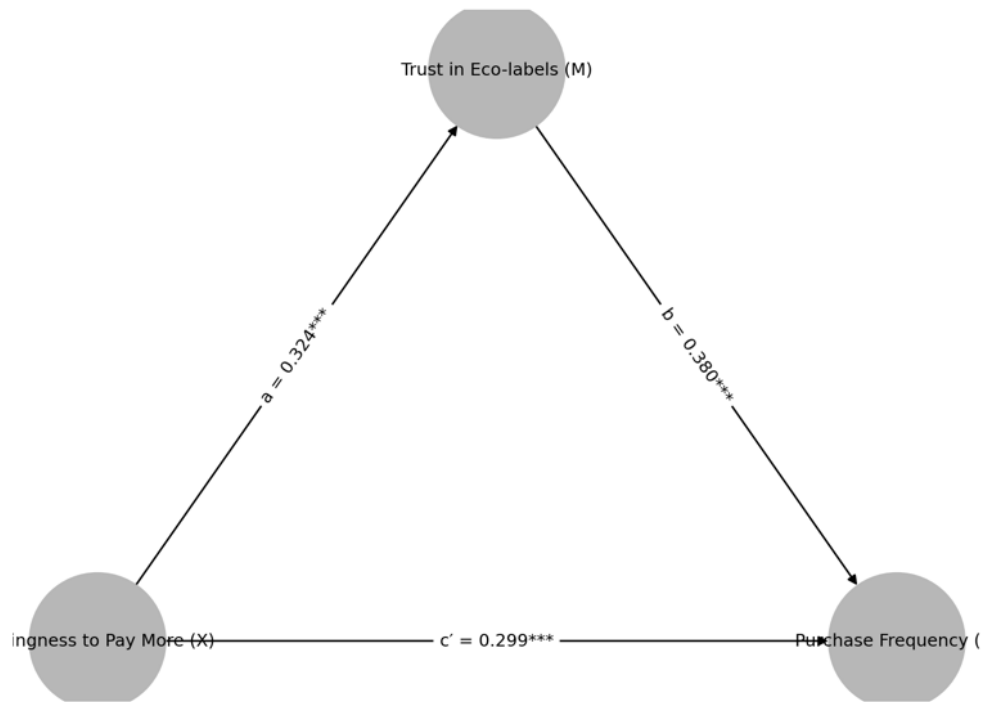
Figure 2: Relationship between Trust and Purchase Frequency



Source: own processing, 2025

The third hypothesis (H3) suggested that a willingness to pay more for an eco-friendly product increases trust in labels, which then promotes more frequent purchases. Mediated regression analysis confirmed this relationship ($a = 0.324$; $b = 0.380$; indirect effect = 0.123). Sobel's test validated the statistical significance of the mediated effect ($z = 4.56$; $p < 0.001$). Therefore, it can be concluded that financially tolerant consumers are more likely to trust eco-labels, and this trust influences their actual purchasing behaviour behavior.

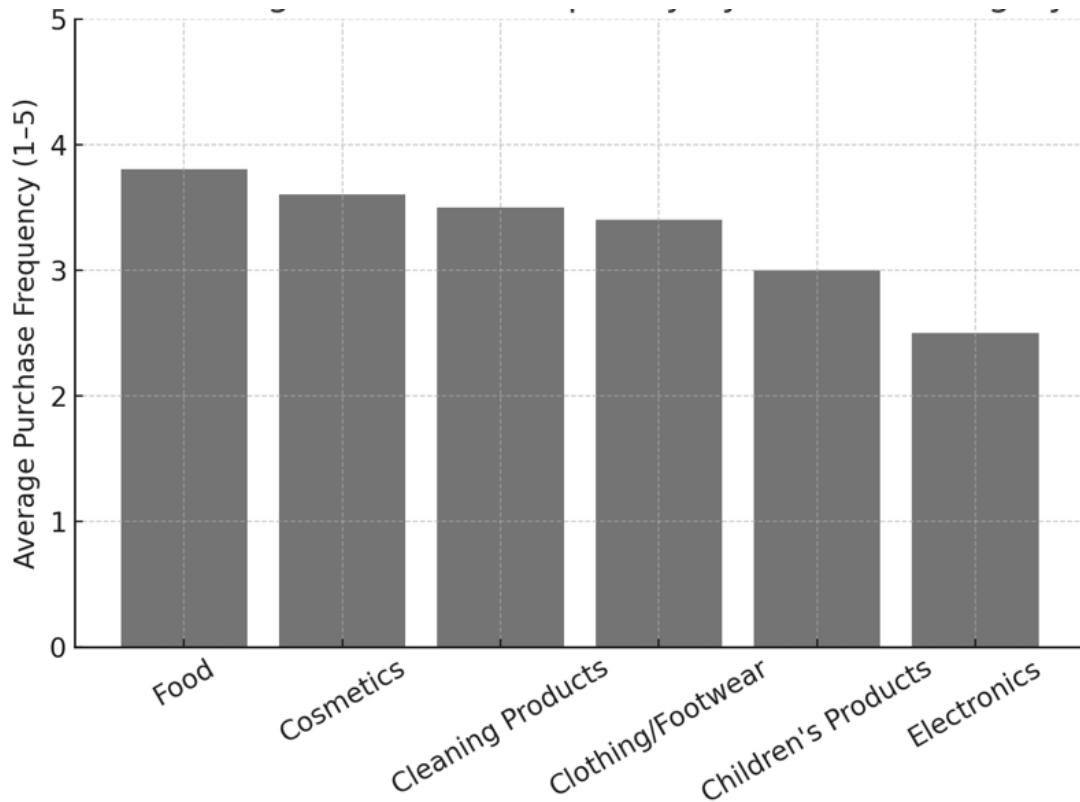
Figure 3: Mediation of Trust between Willingness to Pay More and Purchase



Source: own processing, 2025

The fourth hypothesis (H4) predicted differences in purchase frequency across various product categories. The χ^2 test results ($\chi^2 (20) = 459.66; p < 0.001$) confirmed a significant association. The average frequency scores showed that eco-labels are most influential for food (M = 3.8) and cosmetics (M = 3.5), while the lowest scores were for electronics (M = 2.4). Post-hoc tests revealed statistically significant differences between food and electronics, as well as between food and clothing ($p < 0.01$). These findings suggest that consumer sensitivity to eco-labels is strongly affected by the type of product.

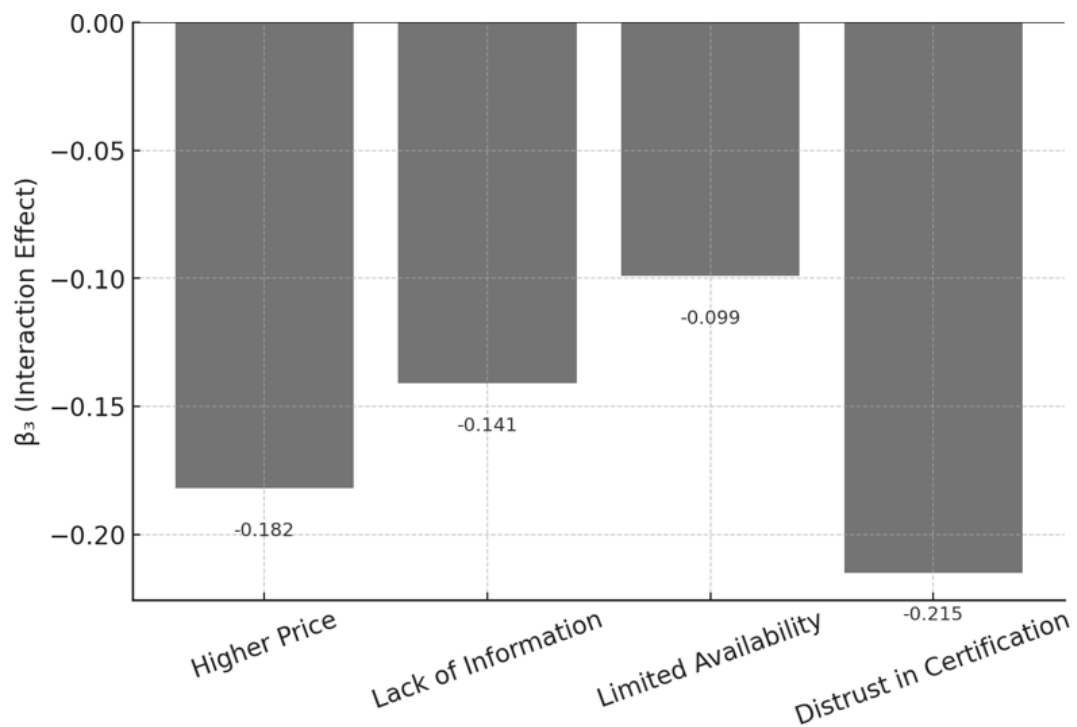
Figure 4: Average Purchase Frequency by Product Category



Source: own processing, 2025

The fifth hypothesis (H5) investigated the effect of barriers on the relationship between trust and purchase. Hierarchical regression analysis indicated that barriers such as price ($\beta = -0.182$) and distrust ($\beta = -0.215$) weaken this relationship ($p < 0.01$). Although trust itself increases the frequency of purchases, the presence of barriers significantly reduces this effect, highlighting the importance of practical factors in consumer behaviour decision-making.

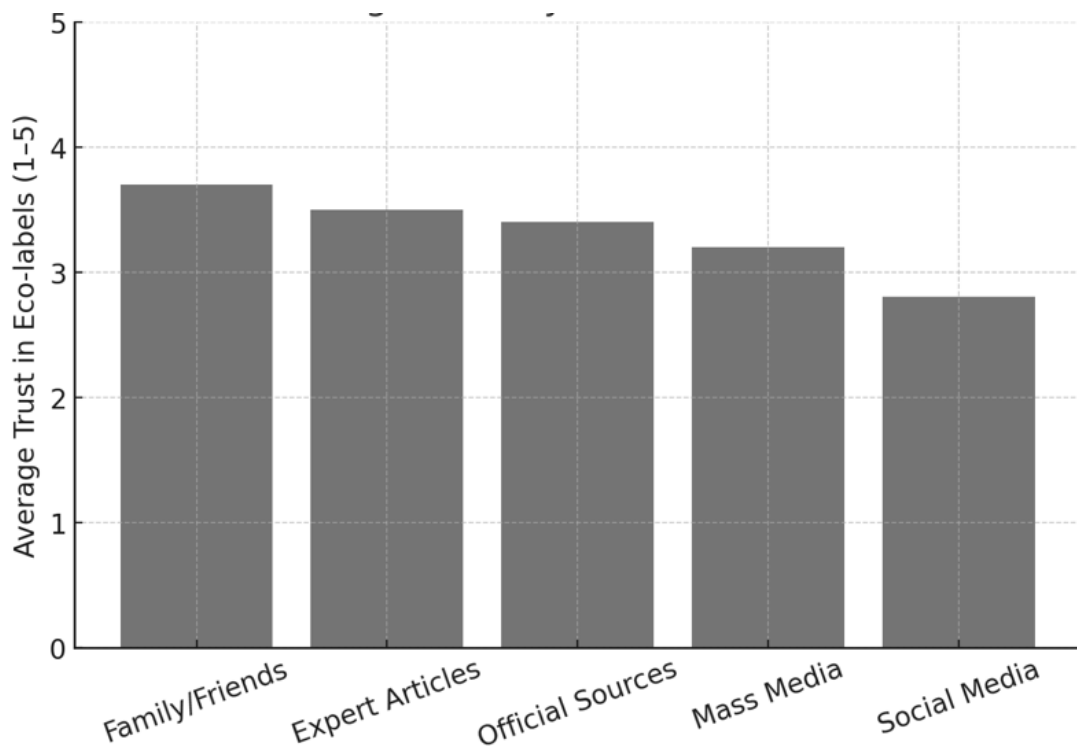
Figure 5: Moderation Effects of Barriers on Trust → Purchase



Source: own processing, 2025

The last hypothesis (H6) examined sources of information that influence trust and subsequently mediate purchasing behaviour. The analysis of variance revealed differences between sources: the highest average trust levels were found in information from family and friends ($M = 3.9$) and online reviews ($M = 3.7$), while social networks showed the lowest value ($M = 2.8$; $p < 0.01$). Mediated regression analysis confirmed a statistically significant indirect effect of trust ($p < 0.05$). This suggests that personal and trustworthy sources of information are crucial in building trust and consequently in encouraging purchasing behavior.

Figure 6: Average Trust by Source of Information



Source: own processing, 2025

The results demonstrate a consistent link between trust in eco-labels and actual purchasing behaviour. The strongest impact was seen in the food and cosmetics sectors, where consumers reported the highest frequency of purchases. Another key finding is the role of information sources and perceived barriers, which can greatly influence or hinder consumer decisions behavior.

DISCUSSION

The research findings confirm that eco-labels play an important role in influencing consumer behaviour, but their effectiveness is not absolute and depends on several factors. Consistent with previous studies (Grunert, Hieke and Wills, 2014; Testa et al., 2019), it has been demonstrated that trust in labels is a crucial factor in the willingness to buy eco-friendly products.

The results align well with the theoretical framework adopted in this study. In line with signalling theory, eco-labels act as credibility signals that help consumers reduce uncertainty

in their purchasing decisions. Similarly, the Theory of Planned Behavior provides a useful explanation for the role of trust and perceived control in shaping behavioural intentions, which then translate into actual behaviour. Higher trust levels increase purchasing frequency, while perceived barriers reduce consumers' sense of control, weakening this relationship. These findings support previous empirical research in Western Europe and Asia, but they also highlight specific patterns in the Slovak context, where trust and personal information channels appear particularly decisive.

A significant contribution of this article is recognising barriers as moderators. Although most respondents expressed willingness to pay more for organic products, perceptions of high prices and, especially, distrust of certification, considerably weakened this relationship. This shows that merely having a label is not enough; its value relies on the credibility and transparency of the certification process.

These findings provide both theoretical and practical insights. Theoretically, they confirm that trust is not only a direct predictor of behaviour but also interacts with structural factors such as price and availability. This interaction explains why attitudes do not always translate into action, thereby helping to address the green gap identified in the literature. Empirically, the study extends existing evidence by focusing on Slovak consumers, an under-researched group, and reveals how cultural and informational contexts influence eco-label effectiveness.

Another important insight is that the influence of eco-labels varies across different product categories. The highest purchase rate was seen for everyday items (such as food, cosmetics, and cleaning products), while the impact was less pronounced for specialised or more luxurious goods (like clothing or electronics). This supports the idea that eco-labels are more impactful for products perceived as "close" and used daily basis.

The influence of information sources is also particularly significant. Respondents relying on social networks exhibited lower trust, which aligns with research on the spread of misinformation and limited content regulation. Conversely, personal recommendations and expert articles increased trust and, consequently, purchasing behaviour. This finding emphasises the importance of differentiating between various types of information channels when evaluating the effectiveness of marketing communications behavior.

From a practical and public administration perspective, the results indicate that policymakers, regulatory institutions, and public authorities should focus on strengthening independent certification systems, improving the transparency and standardisation of eco-labels, and ensuring that their meaning is communicated through credible and publicly trusted information channels. Public administration plays a crucial role not only in regulating certification frameworks, but also in building institutional trust and consumer confidence through educational campaigns, monitoring mechanisms, and stricter control of misleading environmental claims and greenwashing practices. In addition, integrating eco-label policies into broader sustainability and consumer protection strategies could enhance their long-term effectiveness. Targeting product categories where eco-labels have the strongest influence, particularly everyday consumer goods such as food, cosmetics, and cleaning products, may maximise policy impact and contribute to more sustainable consumption patterns. At the same time, public interventions aimed at reducing price and availability barriers, for example through incentives, subsidies, or support for sustainable supply chains, appear essential for maintaining long-term behavioural change among consumers.

Finally, the discussion explains how the study addresses the previously identified research gap. By integrating behavioural theories with empirical evidence from the Slovak market, the study provides a clearer understanding of why consumers either respond to or ignore eco-labels. This contributes not only to theoretical development but also to evidence-based policymaking and practical public administration strategies, rather than relying solely on normative claims. The findings emphasise specific mechanisms—trust, information credibility, institutional transparency, and perceived barriers—that influence purchasing behaviour, offering a grounded explanation rather than a purely descriptive account. The study therefore contributes to the broader debate on how public institutions can shape sustainable consumer behaviour through regulatory tools, communication strategies, and credible environmental governance.

CONCLUSION

The research confirms that eco-labels are a key factor shaping consumer behaviour, but their effectiveness depends on trust levels, transparency of certification processes, and product categories. The strongest impact was seen in everyday consumer goods, while in specialised

segments, their role is lesser. Barriers like price and availability weaken the positive link between trust and purchase, emphasising the need to balance environmental aims with economic realities. The influence of information sources is also crucial: personal recommendations and expert reviews boost trust, whereas social networks can diminish it weakening.

For businesses and policymakers, this means that the effectiveness of eco-labels can only be improved if they are communicated clearly, supported by independent certification, and accompanied by a clear explanation of their meaning. A practical suggestion is to focus on categories where eco-labels have the greatest potential and to build trust through transparent communication. Future research should aim to explore the green gap more deeply, as well as cross-cultural comparisons that will offer a better understanding of consumer behaviour in different contexts countries.

Despite these contributions, several limitations should be acknowledged. The use of convenience sampling limits the generalisability of the findings to the broader Slovak population. Self-reported data may also be influenced by social desirability bias, potentially overstating environmentally friendly attitudes or behaviours. In addition, the cross-sectional design does not allow for causal inferences, and the study focuses primarily on Slovak consumers, which may limit the applicability of results to other cultural contexts.

Future research could address these limitations by employing probability sampling methods, longitudinal designs to capture behavioural change over time, and experimental approaches to test causal mechanisms more directly. Comparative cross-cultural studies would also provide valuable insights into how national and cultural factors influence the effectiveness of eco-labels. Furthermore, qualitative methods such as interviews or focus groups could help explore the psychological and social processes underlying trust formation and decision-making in greater depth. By acknowledging these limitations and outlining future research directions, this study provides a foundation for further theoretical development and practical applications in promoting sustainable consumption.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This paper was supported by the KEGA project No. 065UK-4/2024 The Use of Artificial Intelligence in Human Resource Management.

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